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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE.

November 27, 1895.

No. 892.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LXIX.



OR,
STRANGLER, THE
High-Flyer Suspect.

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CHAPTER I.

THE LANDLORD'S STORY.

"By Jove! that is a pretty girl!"

The exclamation came from a well-dressed gentleman who sat on the veranda of the Old-harbor Hotel, in the fishing village of Oldhar-bor at the eastern end of Long Island, New York.

The speaker was a dashing-looking man of thirty-five or thereabouts, he had very black

THE SPY AT THE WINDOW CHUCKLED TO HIMSELF. "AHA! THE SHE-DEVIL IS
GETTING IT!" HE MUTTERED.

hair, and a long drooping mustache of the same hue.

Quite a distinguished-looking personage, only there was something about the face which would not have favorably impressed a good judge of character.

Lawrence Paddlewick, New York City, was the inscription he placed upon the hotel register, to the landlord he had announced that he was a journalist by profession, and, as he was suffering from overwork, had been advised by his doctor to take a rest in some quiet country place.

A friend had recommended Oldharbor, and so he had come there.

It was early in September: the boarding season was about over—Oldharbor was a great resort for people who desired to spend a few weeks in the country and yet were obliged to be careful in their expenditures—so the gentleman was accommodated with a fine room.

He arrived on the afternoon train, had supper, and then took a seat on the veranda, where he was soon joined by the landlord, who, with the inquisitiveness of the average countryman, was anxious to find out all he could about his guest.

But the stranger was far more than a match for the dull, heavy-headed landlord, and though he apparently answered all questions asked, yet, in reality, he gave no more information than he had first vouchsafed.

Just as the landlord had come to the end of his cross-examination, the young lady passed whose appearance drew from the gentleman the exclamation:

"By Jove! That is a pretty girl!"

There was a large light in front of the hotel, and as she passed under it her features were plainly visible.

She was a little above the medium size, a brunette, with regular, finely-cut features, great black eyes, and hair of the same hue.

The gentleman was correct when he declared she was a pretty girl; she was not only handsome in face, but her form would have served for a sculptor's model, and as she walked there was grace in every movement.

Little wonder the girl, so far superior to the usual run of women, attracted the attention of the experienced man of the world.

"Yas; she is one of the best-looking gals in the town," the landlord remarked, waiting, though, until the young lady passed out of the circle of light before he replied.

The gentleman had spoken in a sufficiently loud tone to reach her hearing, and that she had overheard his complimentary words was apparent from the slight start she gave, and the manner in which she hurried on as though more alarmed than flattered by the declaration.

"Her face is not a common one, and yet it seems to me I have seen one like it before somewhere," the gentleman added, more to himself than to his companion, evidently deeply buried in reflection.

"Wal, I dunno; she is a mighty slick-looking gal. She is a reg'lar high-headed critter, too; nothin' common 'bout her, you bet!" assured the innkeeper.

"What is her name, and who is she?"

"Wal, she ain't got much to be proud of, 'cos she is only an orphan without any folks, and she lives with a rich old maid who took the gal out of some 'sylum when she was only a bobby. Took her for company, I s'pose, jest as some old maids pet dogs and cats; but I reckon this gal ain't got much petting since she was big enuff to do the work. The old woman dresses her well, and had her well educated—sent her to the 'cademy here, you know, the common public school wasn't good enuff for her, but the neighbors said she is as cross as two sticks to the gal; but then, the woman is getting old, and she allus was cranky and quarrelsome; got heaps of money, you know, and don't care a pin for nothin' and nobody."

"Plenty of money is apt to make one independent."

"Yes, but she needn't put on so many airs. Now, when she fu'st came here 'bout ten years ago—"

"Oh, she is not a native, then?"

"No, no, bless yer! She's a Yorker, and not a soul here knows anything 'bout her, 'cept what she has told, and that is mighty little. Her doctor ordered her to come to the country for her health and recommended this place; she was not married; never had been, nor expected to be; had plenty of money, didn't seek acquaintances, and would be much obliged if people would mind their own business as far as she was concerned; and, as I was going to say, some of our best women called on her when she fu'st come, and though she was polite enuff, yet she didn't treat 'em as if she wanted 'em to call again."

"I suppose they took the hint and let her alone."

"Oh, yes, our women in this 'ere town think that they are some punkins if they ain't rich, and they jest turned up their noses at such treatment. Then there were some awful stories started 'bout this strange woman; it was said that she had been obliged to leave New York, that she was a bad character and all that sort of

thing, and they were making the town mighty hot for her, I tell yer, when she sprung a trap on the people what were talking that was really surprising."

"How was that?"

"She engaged a couple of York detectives to come down here, and when they got the folks who were a-doing the talking down fine, she had a lawyer call on 'em with a perlite invitation to come into court and prove what they said or make a written apology."

"She was sharp!"

"You bet! and the way it made the talkers squirm was a caution."

"They apologized, of course?"

"You better believe they did, and she was a big gun arter that. Of course you know it was all lies. Nobody knew anything about her at all. She went to church reg'larly, could always be depended upon to give more money for the support of the minister, or to any charity, than anybody else in the town, and paid cash on the nail for everything she got."

"A fine reputation!" the gentleman declared. "Evidently a wealthy woman, although a little eccentric. The girl, I suppose, will be her heiress!"

"Not much!" the landlord replied. "She has taken pains to have *that* understood, for she said she did not want Irma—that is the gal's name—to grow up with any false impressions. When she dies her income dies with her, and the gal will be obliged to look out for herself. She has got a good education, can teach school, or give music lessons, for she is a reg'lar genius in *that* way, and for stage-acting, why, she is wonderful! We have a dramatic society in town, and Irma is the best one of the crowd, can put on like all-possessed; they giv' a show two or three times a year to help the firemen along or to buy somethin' for the school or somethin' like that, and she is the star every time, you bet!"

"Ah, yes, I have heard of these village prodigies before, but, somehow, when they try to display their talents in the regular theaters they usually make sad failures."

"Wal, I would be willing to bet a hat that this gal wouldn't—not this Irma Allison!"

The gentleman started slightly at the name.

"Allison? Named after her protector, I presume?"

"Yes, she is called Allison, but *her* fu'st name is Elizabeth."

"Where does she live—in a grand house, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, a nice little cottage on Sound avenue. That is the first street to the left just after you pass the school-house as you go down Main street, here."

Just then the landlord was summoned, and when he disappeared, Mr. Paddlewick sprung to his feet and hastened down the street in the direction the girl had taken.

"By pure accident I have struck the clew at last!" he cried.

CHAPTER II.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

THE man hastened onward at a rapid rate, but after two or three minutes, slackened his pace.

"Come, come, this will not do!" he muttered. "If the girl should happen to detect me running after her, at this rate, it would be certain to excite her suspicions at once, and then all the fat would be in the fire, for she overheard what I said about her being a pretty girl, and if she detected that I was in chase, she would be sure to take alarm."

"Besides, what good will it do me to overtake her to-night? If I should attempt to speak to her, she would undoubtedly be frightened, and it is not my game to make myself an object of terror to her sight in the beginning."

"How strange are the ways of this life!" he mused, as he sauntered slowly onward. "Here, for a good fifteen years, I have been on the track of this woman; have played detective, and, from my experience with the world, I flatter myself that I made a good showing in that line, and when I was flush, employed the regular bloodhounds—all to no purpose, yet here, just by accident, I stumble upon my game."

"And, isn't it strange, too, how the average man or woman, when they seek to conceal themselves by assuming a false name, will in nine cases out of ten betray their identity by the name they take?"

"Miss Elizabeth Allison Marmaduke thought she had completely disguised herself when she simply dropped the name of Marmaduke."

And the gentleman chuckled in a merry way for a few moments.

"It is odd, though, that she has succeeded in keeping herself concealed all these years in this simple way. I traced her to the steamer, but after she landed in New York with the child, I could get no more tidings of her than if the earth had opened and swallowed both of them; and yet, here they have been all this time within a hundred miles of New York!"

"It is the old story: we miss things under our noses and find those far distant."

"What a likeness the girl bears to the woman

I loved and lost twenty years ago!" and the speaker sighed.

"Perhaps, though, it may be possible, if I play my game rightly, that *this* charming young creature may console me for the loss of long ago!"

At this point the man chanced to notice a street on his left, and by the lights from the corner store discerned the name "Sound Avenue" on a small sign, nailed to a tree-trunk.

"Here, then, I turn," the man soliloquized.

"But how will I know when I come to the house? If I inquire in the store, suspicion would be excited, for these country louts have nothing else to do but to comment on the actions of strangers, and it would be all over the village to-morrow that I was inquiring after this woman who has been for years a source of wonder to these blockheads. I will walk a little way up the street, and may meet some small boy who can give me all necessary information without exciting his curiosity."

Paddlewick proceeded on up Sound avenue, which soon developed into an ordinary country road with houses few and far between. The moon was slowly rising, and afforded sufficient light to enable Paddlewick to view the surroundings.

A short distance from Main street the road crossed the railway track, and then bent abruptly to the left.

A thick growth of small trees and bushes by the road obstructed the view.

Just as the man came to the turn, the sound of a woman's voice, raised high in shrill and angry tones, came distinctly to his hearing.

"Aha! I have caught you, have I?" cried the voice, trembling with anger. "And do you dare to disobey me in this flagrant way, after all I have done for you? But you shall pack out of my house to-morrow, for I will have no more of it, you ungrateful, disobedient girl!"

"Aunty, this language is intolerable and I cannot submit to it!" a girl's voice, rich and harmonious, answered; "and you, I am sure, will soon learn to regret having spoken to me in such a way."

"Don't you dare to threaten me! Go in the house, and, as for you, Oliphant Strong, you might as well understand; first as last, that this girl hain't got a penny in the world, and if you think she will get anything from me when she marries, or at my death, you are greatly mistaken!"

"Oliphant Strong!" muttered Paddlewick, in astonishment. "Well, here is another piece of luck! Egad! This world is a pretty small one, after all, when I run against old acquaintances at every turn."

"You are very much mistaken, madam, I assure you," said a deep, strong, male voice. "I happened to meet Miss Irma by accident, just as she was about to enter the gate, and merely stopped to speak to her about the rehearsal for the concert next week."

"Oh, yes, a likely story!" the shrill voice cried, in evident derision. "But I know better! She went out on purpose to meet you; but I will not have such goings-on, right at my gate! If you want to see the girl why do you not come up to the house like a man, and not sneak around the garden as though you were trying to steal something?"

"Madam, please don't make the mistake of taking me for a fool, for I am not one," the young man—for such the speaker evidently was—answered. "I am well aware that, if I should present myself at your door, my reception would not be a cordial one, and the chances are great that you would not hesitate to tell me to go about my business. And I further beg to assure you, in the most emphatic manner, that I am *not* a suitor for Miss Irma's affections. I am proud to call myself the young lady's friend, though, and with this assurance I wish you a very good evening!"

And Paddlewick could hear the footsteps of the speaker marching down the road toward where he had halted.

The violent bang of a door signified that the woman with the shrill voice, and the girl, whom she had so violently upbraided, had entered the house.

Paddlewick resumed his onward progress, and encountered the young man just at the turn of the road.

"Hello, Mr. Strong, is that you?" the New Yorker exclaimed, halting with outstretched hand.

The new-comer was a good-looking, well-built fellow of twenty-four or thereabouts, with light hair, dark blue eyes, and regular features which wore an expression of resolute manliness.

"Why, Mr. Paddlewick, this is a surprise!" he declared. "You are about the last man I expected to see in Oldharbor!"

"I might say the same of you. I haven't seen you since I stopped at the Metropolitan Hotel, where you were clerk in the office."

"Yes, I was night clerk there, and had a good berth, too, although the salary was small."

"How comes it that I find you down here at the jumping-off place of civilization, as it were?"

"Upon my word you are right there!" the young man declared. "You never said a truer

thing; this is the jumping-off place of civilization; the majority of the inhabitants here, too, have already made the leap, for they are as much without the bounds of civilization as the dwellers in the wild Western camps."

"How is it that you are here then?"

"Because I am a donkey!" the other answered, in the frankest manner. "A friend of mine had to take the stock of a small country store in this place on a mortgage, and he thought it would be a fine start in the world for me to come down here and run it."

"Well, I should think that would have been a good opportunity."

"Not a bit of it. This town is absolutely dead. There are two stores here now when there is only room for one, and then the people are all intermarried; everybody is a cousin or a brother-in law of somebody else, and a stranger stands no chance at all. In fact, the average Eastern Long-Islander regards all strangers in the light of natural enemies, who are to be fought, or plundered, as the opportunity offers. Then business here is all credit, or barter, and little cash, and from my experience I should say that the biggest rascal here will make the most money, for it is a cut-throat game all the way through."

"You speak hotly."

"If you had gone through what I have during the past year, and knew what utterly vile curs there are in this place, who are supposed to be decent citizens, you would not be as mild in putting things as I am!" the young man declared. "But, thank Heaven! I will soon be out of it. I have arranged to turn the business over to my clerk; he is a native, and used to their mean ways, so will, probably, get along. In a week or two I shall be back in a Christian land again."

Paddlewick laughed.

"By the way, from the conversation I overheard just now, I should fancy you had got mixed up in a love affair here, in spite of your dislike of the inhabitants."

The young man colored up a little, then laughed, as he answered:

"Well, the lady is not a native, and she is a capital girl; but I am not in love with her, all the same. The old lady, her aunt, jumped to a wrong conclusion."

"Pray, what is the name of the lady? I heard just enough of the conversation to become interested in the matter."

"The girl is called Irma Allison, and her aunt is named Elizabeth. People here think she is a good deal of a crank, and are rather afraid of her, and from the sample I have had of her quality to-night, I believe they are about right. But the old lady is out of her reckoning if she thinks I am after the girl. In the first place, I cannot afford to get married, and I am not going to bind any girl to an engagement until I see some chance ahead of doing far better than I am doing now."

"You are quite right," the other declared. "Well, I am glad to have met you, so unexpected, too. I came down here for my health, and expect to stay a week or so to recruit. I was out for a walk, but had no idea of meeting a soul that I knew when I started. Well, I'll see you again. Adieu!"

The young man returned the salutation, then proceeded down the road, while Paddlewick kept on up it.

In a few moments he arrived in front of the house at the gate of which the conversation had taken place between the three.

He examined the house and surroundings with the eyes of a hawk.

It was a small, two-storied cottage, standing all alone in the midst of a garden thickly filled with trees and bushes, many of which were evergreens growing in clumps.

The nearest house was across the way, a good two hundred feet distant.

"Plenty of opportunities for concealment if it becomes necessary for me to play the spy on the house," Paddlewick muttered, as he walked slowly along.

CHAPTER III.

THE GENTLEMAN KNOWN AS "SOAP."

PADDLEWICK was deep in meditation as he proceeded up the road.

"Now, then, how shall I best turn this affair to my advantage?" he mused. "There is a large amount of money in it, and if I can only manage to secure the plum, I will have enough to last me for the rest of my life; but how can it be worked? Ah, there's the rub!"

Puzzling over the question, he walked on abstractedly for a good five minutes, until roused from his musing by the approach of a man down the road.

The new-comer walked with a peculiar, cat-like pace, so that his footsteps made but little noise, and he was within fifty feet of Paddlewick before that person was aware of his approach.

The stranger was a little below the medium size, and was dressed rather roughly, looking like a horsey farmer. He had a shrewd, weather-beaten face wherein twinkled as keen a pair of gray eyes as ever mortal possessed.

He uttered a cry of surprise when he beheld the New-Yorker.

"Well, dash my blooming eyes! if it ain't the governor!" he exclaimed.

Paddlewick halted in astonishment, while the other advanced with outstretched hand.

"Well! well! It fairly rains old acquaintances to-night," the New-Yorker muttered, under his breath.

"I wish I may die, governor, if I expected to see you down in this 'ere place!" the new-comer continued, shaking the hand of the other in a very cordial way.

"I may say the same; and what a queer get-up you have on!"

"Yes, you can bet yer blooming life on that! I don't look much now like the gentleman known to fame, and the police, as Soap Mackenzie."

"No, not much!"

"I am in the bunco line now; am working the trick with Reddy, the Tinker—that is old Reddy Gallagher, you know."

"Ah, yes."

"We are a pair of honest farmers now, with a deal of sporting blood in our veins, and we are down on the island a-looking for a good farm where we can go into the raising of blooded stock."

"That is the game, eh?"

"Yes, and oh, how slick it works!" Soap declared, with a chuckle. "These country Jakes are as keen as they make 'em, you know, and in a trade they will skin a city man clean to the bone, every time! But when we come along and strike a rich old hunk, with plenty of ducats, and a farm to sell, he is our mutton, every time! Say his farm is worth four or five thousand—he allers begins by asking a couple of thousand more, and we, you know, jest like two blooming greenhorns, jump at the chance. The old guy thinks he is going to skin us, and then we come our funny business of asking the Jake to show up two or three thousand dollars, just as a guarantee that he means business, is a solid man, and kin give a good title to his property."

"Ah, yes, yes; I see; a fine scheme!"

"If he takes the bait—and 'bout nine out of every ten are so anxious to skin the supposed greenhorns that they jump at the chance—he goes to the bank and draws out the money, and the moment he does that he is our pie, for we are bound to git the cash away from him. If he won't play cards, or bet on no, sure thing, why, we watch our chance, knock him over the head and do the grab act, for we git there, every time!"

"And are you working a lay of that kind now?"

"Yes, we have got an old cove in tow that lives up on the North Road, as they call it here; but I am a leetle doubtful 'bout our working it this time."

"What is the trouble?"

"Well, the thing went all right up to drawing the money. He was to have gone to the bank, which is at Greenport, down at the end of the railroad, to draw the money, this afternoon, but, just as he was gitting ready to drive down with us in his buggy, this afternoon, he was taken sick; so, instead of going, he sent a message to a lawyer there; but what that message was we couldn't find out, although I piped the messenger to the lawyer's office. But I heard the legal shark tell the boy, arter he read the letter that the old man writ, that he had to come up to Oldharbor to-night to see a Miss Allison, or some sick name, who, I found out, lives on this road, and, arter he got through there, he would come up to his house."

A peculiar look appeared in Paddlewick's eyes when Miss Allison's name was mentioned, but he was careful not to betray his surprise.

"It seems to me that the lawyer business looks bad," the New-Yorker observed.

"That is just what the Tinker and me think, and it is a blooming shame, arter we had worked the game so well!" Soap declared, with a melancholy shake of the head.

"Furst our idee war that the old duffer had sent instructions to the lawyer to go and draw the money from the bank, but I shadowed the shark, and nary funds did he draw, so I am afraid the old man has sent for him to consult about the thing; and if that is so, the jig is up!"

"Yes, undoubtedly."

"I was jest skirmishing along the road hereso as to see when the lawyer comes, and then I am to give warning to Tinker, and we have got a plan fixed, so we reckon we kin hear what goes on between the two, after the lawyer gits to the old snoozer's house."

"A good idea; but I am afraid your cake is all dough, in this case."

"Well, we will strike some other duffer, then. You know there is a sucker born every minute, and men of genius, like us, you see, have got to get our bread out of them."

"True enough."

"But, I say, what brings you down here? What little game can you find to work in a hole like this? You are not on the bunco lay?"

"Oh, no; I merely took a run down for a little rest."

"Ah, gammon! What are you givin' me?"

and Mackenzie stuck his tongue in his cheek in a very significant way.

"Oh, honest, I assure you!" Paddlewick protested. "There isn't any game down here for a man like I am to play."

"No, I should say not, for the bunco trick is not in your line, and that is the only game as can be worked in a God-forsaken place like this. A cracksman would starve to death if he attempted to get a living here. He might crack a dozen cribs without getting a century for his trouble. But, I see how it is with you!" the other exclaimed, as a sudden idea came to him. "You worked some game in New York that made the city too hot to hold you, and you have come down here to rusticate until the thing blows over."

"Soap, you were always noted for having a head on your shoulders, and I think you can see as far into a mill-stone as the next man."

"Oh, you bet yer sweet life on that!" the other exclaimed, with a grin. "But, I say, governor, you allers had a keen nose for smelling out a profitable job, and if you should happen to run across anything here and want Tinker and a cove like me to help yer, we will be glad to do it, for I am afraid this blooming thing that we are onto now is a-going up the spout."

"All right; I will not fail to do so. I am at the hotel, and you can see me there to-morrow, but be careful not to allow it to become known that we are acquainted, for it might excite suspicion."

"Oh, that is all right! There are no flies on either Reddy, the Tinker, or Soap Mackenzie!"

The sound of a carriage approaching came to the hearing of the two.

"That is the lawyer, I'll be bound," the bunco man declared. "The Allison house, where he is going to stop first, is only a little way down the road. We can see if he stops there. I got on to the kind of a boss he drives—it is a white beast."

The carriage came in sight.

"It is your man, sure enough, for it is a white horse," Paddlewick declared.

"I'll be off then, to warn my pal. Ta, ta! I'll see you to-morrow, maybe!" and the fellow hurried away, while Paddlewick turned and retraced his steps with equal celerity.

"Will it not be possible for me to play the same game that these fellows intend to try?" he questioned as he hastened onward.

"Can I not play spy upon this interview between Elizabeth Allison and the lawyer? I do not see any reason why I cannot, and I may learn something of importance to me. These country houses are, as a rule, poorly built, and if I can get close up under one of the windows, the chances are that if the two speak in a natural tone of voice, I shall be able to overhear what is said. It is worth the trial, anyway. I regard it as a lucky chance that these two rascals are in the neighborhood just at present, for I may need their services, and I know I can depend upon them, for they are good men—the kind of fellows who will not hesitate at anything, provided they are well paid for their work."

Reaching the borders of Miss Allison's garden, he quitted the footpath and climbed over the low fence which surrounded the grounds.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WOMAN HESITATES.

THERE was an ell extending from the cottage on the north side and well to the rear of the house, and as the apartment of this addition on the ground floor was lit up, while all the rest of the house was in darkness, the spy came to the conclusion that the interview between Miss Allison and the lawyer would take place in this room, so he made his way in the most cautious manner to the side window.

Close to the window grew a sprawling bush, and when the New-Yorker snuggled down under the window, the foliage concealed him from the sight of any one passing by on the road.

Fortune favored the eavesdropper, for, after getting into his position, he found that his surmise was correct; Miss Allison and the old lawyer were in the room, and he could not only hear what was said, for the window was up a half-inch or so from the bottom, but he could plainly see all that passed within the room, for the curtain was up-drawn for a foot or more.

It was with intense curiosity the outside observer peered through the window at the occupants.

It had been fifteen years since he had seen the face of Elizabeth Allison Marmaduke, to give the woman her whole name.

She had not changed much, although she looked older than she really was, a woman of forty; but she had a strong, hard, masculine face, one that plainly showed the effects of time, care, and a soured temper.

No wonder she had never married; her race was not one to attract; and she was harsh and imperious in her manner.

Jacob Foxcroft, the leading lawyer of that part of the country, was a man of fully fifty, but he was one of those jolly, young-looking

men who never seem to grow old, and yet there was a shrewd look in his eyes, and resolute lines around his mouth, which seemed to say that, jolly and good-natured as he seemed to be, in a contest he would prove to be no mean antagonist to a powerful opponent.

The night was not chilly; yet, in anticipation that it might turn cold, the lawyer had worn an overcoat, and had asked Miss Allison, after entering the house, if she desired to see him upon business which would require him to remain, as otherwise he would not remove his coat.

She answered that she would be obliged to detain him some little time; therefore the lawyer took off his coat, thus occasioning a slight delay, so that the eavesdropper was able to get into his position just as the pair took seats.

"Mr. Foxcroft, I never had the pleasure of meeting you before, but I have heard you highly spoken of by people in whose judgment I have faith," Miss Allison began.

"Well, I believe I possess a pretty good reputation," the lawyer said, with a smile.

"Yes, I have heard it said that you are one of the few lawyers to be found who do not believe in encouraging litigation, and that you have been known to tell prospective clients that they had no case, and, if they were wise, they would settle matters outside of a court."

"Well, that is the truth," the lawyer admitted. "And that is the rule I have always gone on since I began the practice of my profession; but then, I was not, as most young lawyers are, obliged to depend upon my business for my bread and butter. My father was comfortably well-off, and, being an only child, I inherited his estate. Many a time have I advised a man that, in my judgment, he had no case, and refused to appear for him, and on several occasions the fellow has taken his trouble to another lawyer, and my learned brother managed to win, thereby getting the laugh on me. These cases, though, were all jury ones, and a distinguished English lawyer once made the remark that Providence alone could tell what verdict the average jury would bring in."

"I mentioned this peculiar custom of yours for the purpose of explaining why I have sought your advice, for it is not in regard to any legal business that I seek your aid."

The lawyer looked surprised.

"Well, really, if it is not a legal matter, I don't know as I would be able to be of any assistance."

"Oh, yes, you are a trained professional man—it has been your business for years to get at the truth—to tear aside the veil which accident, sophistry or cunning malice may have interposed to hide it. Now I want to get at the truth, but I have not sufficient confidence in myself to believe that I can do it unaided," the lady declared, evidently deeply agitated. "I am a partisan—my mind is warped in one direction, and I feel certain that I will not be able to see the matter as it truly is."

"Well, really, madam, this is something so entirely unexpected that I am rather puzzled."

"In the midst of life we are in death," Miss Allison said, in a solemn manner. "I attended a funeral service this afternoon, and those words have been ringing in my ears ever since. I am not at all superstitious, you know, but I cannot help thinking how true those words are. We are here to-day, full of life, strong in health—looking forward to many years' enjoyment of the good things of this world, when, lo! there comes an icy blast, and we wither away as the flower does at winter's touch."

"That is very true, madam; life is very uncertain," the lawyer said, gravely, impressed by the earnest manner of the other. "And my advice to my clients is to always keep their houses in order, for no man can tell when the dread summons will come."

"Yes; our old minister used those words to-day—'put your house in order'—and mine is not in order!" Miss Allison exclaimed, speaking with a feverish earnestness. "And I don't know whether I can put it in order or not, and that is why I have summoned you."

"Yes, my dear madam; will you excuse the remark if I say that it seems to me the professional man whose advice you need in a case of this kind is not a lawyer but a minister?"

"Oh, no, no, no!" exclaimed the lady, rapidly, an expression of annoyance on her face. "What sort of a man is the poor old dominie to go to for advice in an affair of this kind? Poor old gentleman! he means well, but his abilities are of a very low order indeed, or else he would not have stuck in this obscure village for years, trying to support himself like a gentleman and bring up a family on about fourteen dollars a week—only a trifle more than the wages of a day laborer. If I should seek his advice, he would answer me with a lot of dreary platitudes, and wind up by advising me to seek in the pages of the Bible for both advice and consolation."

"Judging from what I know of the old gentleman, I think you are about right."

"It is of no use for me to consult the Good Book, for, although I read in one place the words of the meek and humble Jesus, 'Love your enemies,' my perverse spirit prompts me to

turn to the Old Testament, where the Lord, with fiery sword executes vengeance upon his enemies, and I say to myself I but follow the old Jewish law—'An eye for an eye, tooth for tooth,' and, did not the Lord himself sanction blood atonement? Wherefore am I to blame, then, for having taken vengeance upon my enemies?"

The lawyer was astonished by this outburst, and looked at the speaker as though he had doubts in regard to her sanity.

"My dear madam, this is not a case for a legal man," he protested. "It is a minister you want, and if the old gentleman here will not answer, go to New York and seek some eminent divine in whom you will have confidence."

"No; I would not have confidence in any of them," she declared. "I do not want an *adviser*. I want a judge, and something seems to whisper to me that what I have to say must be said this night, or not at all."

"Is it possible?" the lawyer exclaimed, examining the lady narrowly.

She guessed what thoughts were passing in his mind.

"Oh, you need not have any doubts in regard to my sanity!" she observed. "I am in full possession of my senses: you are aware that learned judges have decided that, though a man accepts the astounding faith of the Spiritualists, yet he may be perfectly sane."

The other nodded.

"Now, I am only giving heed to a presentiment which has seized upon me, and, Mr. Foxcroft, I ought to be the last person in the world to pay attention to such a thing, for, since I was a child, I have been noted for my strong-mindedness, but, as I told you, the feeling has taken possession of me, and, under the impulse, I sent for you, feeling that you were a man I could fully trust."

The lawyer bowed.

"If I should confide in the dominie, he would be sure to tell his wife something about the case, and, though she is a good, simple-hearted old woman, yet she is a terrible gossip, and could no more keep a secret than she could fly, so that it would not take long for all the village to know of my secret."

"Well, I believe you are right there. Of course, you can rely upon my discretion. Lawyers are used to keeping secrets. It is a part of their profession."

"You will accept the trust, then, that I wish to repose in you?"

"Yes; since you desire it so strongly I will."

"I am going to put a supposed case to you, and I want you to decide just the same as though you were a judge upon the bench with the power of life or death in your hands."

"I will do so; you shall have my opinion freely and frankly."

"Now, the case is this: a young woman is courted by a man whom she finally learns to love almost to idolatry; their wedding-day is fixed, but during the weeks of preparation, a relative of the lady comes to see her, a girl, a few years younger, and oh! so much more beautiful and fascinating in every way. This girl wins the love of the man, and on the very morning of the wedding-day the pair elope together."

"Yes, just such a case occurred in this neighborhood, and the elopement was not discovered until the wedding-party arrived at the church, and then the angry would-be bride dared any of the young men present to take the place of the missing man. An old beau accepted the challenge, and the wedding went on as merrily as though nothing had happened," the lawyer remarked, smiling at the incident.

"This woman would not have married a king!" Miss Allison flamed out.

"Misfortune soon overtook the pair," she continued. "The man's father had set his heart upon his son's marrying the girl whom he deserted, and he promptly disinherited him. The girl had nothing, the man, reared to a life of luxury and ease, was ill-suited to earn his daily bread, but he struggled on as best he could. A year passed and a child was born to them; then a situation abroad was offered to the husband. He accepted it, and the vessel in which he sailed went down with all on board. The wife, left alone, was obliged to take a situation as governess, leaving her child to the care of others."

"Then came the vengeance of the deserted bride. She stole that child, and crossed the ocean with it, desiring to wring the heart of the mother as her heart had been wrung."

"She was never traced, and, two years afterward the mother was killed in a railway accident. It was as if the Lord Himself had taken vengeance into His own hands!"

"Yes, a good many people look at a thing in that light. If an enemy suffers affliction, they cry, 'Ah! the Lord has stricken him!' but when it comes *their* turn to be hurt, they protest: 'Oh! why am I thus persecuted?' was the lawyer's reminder.

The woman winced, for the shot struck home.

"Perhaps you are right. It is human to be egotistical and fancy that the Lord is on our side," Miss Allison confessed.

"Now, then, years have passed, the child has grown up, believing that she is an orphan—

which, indeed, is the truth; all the documents relating to her identity are in the hands of the woman who reared her. Without these papers it would be an impossibility for the girl to prove who she really is. There is a probability—not a very strong one, but still a remote probability, that at some future time there may be money coming to this child if she is able to prove who she is. If the woman destroys the documents it cannot be done.

"Now the question is: should she take vengeance upon the child for the wrong which the mother did her by destroying these papers? How will that act weigh against her in the dread hereafter?

"You see, Mr. Foxcroft," she continued, forcing a smile, "this strong-minded, resolute woman has become as a weak and pining child. The fear of death is before her eyes, and the terrors of the world to come upon her soul; she has grown craven-hearted, and fears for the future."

"My dear madam, you want an honest opinion?"

"Yes, as though you were the last judge called to action by the final trump."

"You shall have it!"

All the jollity and softness had gone out of Jacob Foxcroft's face now, and the dark, judicial frown was upon his brow.

"In regard to the first action, the woman was no Christian, but a savage! A red Indian could not have executed a more fearful vengeance than to rob a doting, husbandless mother of her only child!"

"I did not ask your judgment as to that!" Miss Allison cried, harshly, with dilating eyes.

"A just judge decides upon the merits of the whole case, not a single part!" the lawyer retorted. "The only excuse she can have lies in the old Jewish law which you quoted a few minutes back, but that is gone—two thousand years ago! We live now according to the teaching of the lowly Nazarene—'love your enemies'; 'return good for evil.' And you, madam, in your blind thirst for vengeance, have, like a sheep, gone astray from the teachings of the Holy One who died that man might be saved!" exclaiming the lawyer, in his earnestness forgetting all about the "supposed" case.

"And now, having robbed the innocent child of its natural protector, you are coolly debating whether you had not better strike another blow—another blow at the helpless one who never harmed you!

"Ah, madam, I do not wonder that, when the words, 'in the midst of life we are in death,' rings in your ears, your guilty soul trembles, and an awful dread of what the future may have in store for you creeps over your soul!

"You are quite right not to call upon the old dominie for advice; that good old man would never dare to lift up his voice as I do now, and to tell you that, if you do not do justice to this innocent girl, you are surely booked for Hell and Damnation! Strong language, madam, I am aware, but the situation demands it!"

In his excitement the old lawyer had risen to his feet, and now, with uplifted forefinger, towered over the cowering woman like an avenging angel.

The spy at the window chuckled to himself.

"Aha! the she-devil is getting it!" he muttered.

"Madam, do not palter with your conscience!" the lawyer continued, full of the excitement of the subject. "Do not imagine for a single moment that the Great Judge will accept your plea that you but revenged yourself upon your enemies in mitigation of your offenses, and this last crime which you are meditating is so monstrous that, should you commit it, it is not likely you will be permitted to make any defense at all; you will be condemned unheard to everlasting perdition!"

"You are right," the woman said, slowly, looking up with a face that seemed like marble. "I begin to see myself, now, as you see me; all I can say in explanation is, that I must have been mad for many a year; my thirst for vengeance affected my brain. Ever since the terrible morning when I awoke to the consciousness that I had been deserted for a woman who possessed more charms than I could boast, I have had a dull pain in my head as though a heavy weight were pressing on my brain. But if I repent, even at the eleventh hour, and strive to do what I can for the girl that I have wronged, there may be hope for me."

"Yes; else the Savior died on the cross in vain. 'While the lamp holds out to burn, the vile sinner may return.'

"And I was harsh with her to-night—threatened to drive her from my door to-morrow. Ah, well, if I am spared, I will try and make amends," Miss Allison declared, with a deep sigh.

Then she drew a peculiar little brass key from her pocket and gave it to the lawyer, who by this time had resumed his seat.

"This is the key of that mahogany box yonder," and she pointed to where the box stood on a table.

"In that you will find all the documents relating to the affair."

"Shall I take them with me to-night?" Fox-

croft asked. "They will be much safer in my safe than in this house."

"No, no, I do not wish any one to see them until after I am dead," the woman replied, slowly. "And I have a presentiment, Mr. Foxcroft, that you will not have long to wait for that event."

"Life is uncertain, of course."

"Then they are perfectly safe here; what can happen to them?"

"Danger of fire, you know."

"Very little, for I am extremely careful. Well, that is all, Mr. Foxcroft. I am much obliged for your counsel, and I will pay heed to it. What is your fee?"

"Nothing, madam, thank you!" responded the lawyer, rising, and making a dignified bow; "I do not charge for ministering to a mind diseased. Whenever you need my services in a professional way, I shall be happy to send in a bill."

The lady murmured her thanks, and the lawyer took his departure.

Miss Allison accompanied him to the door, and, after ushering him out, returned to the room where the interview had been held.

"At last the weight is off my mind, and I feel better," she muttered.

Then she paced up and down for fully half an hour, muttering in a disjointed way to herself.

"She is a little cracked in the upper story," the watcher murmured.

The bell of the town-clock rung out ten.

"So late, yet I am not sleepy; but I will lie down on the lounge for awhile, for my headache has come back again."

She put cologne on a handkerchief, tied it on her head, and then extended herself on the lounge, while the eavesdropper watched her with the eyes of a hawk.

Twelve o'clock.

A couple of young men who lived on the North Road, and who had been paying court to two sisters in the village, were on their way home, having made a long call.

As they passed Miss Allison's house a cry came from it that almost made their hair stand on end.

"You are choking me, Irma!" exclaimed the shrill voice of Miss Allison.

The pair halted as if rooted to the spot.

Then there came a muffled scream.

CHAPTER V.

AN AWFUL DISCOVERY.

The young men gazed at each other for a moment with distended eyes.

"Did you hear that, Jonathan?" asked the taller, and older of the two, who answered to the name of Thomas Van Riper, while his companion was called Jonathan Schoville.

"Yes, what does it mean?" replied the other, very pale and nervous.

"Sounds as if there was a fight going on between the old woman and Irma, eh?" said Van Riper.

Both of the youths were members of the dramatic club to which the young girl belonged, and so were well acquainted with her and the peculiar way in which she was situated.

It was an open secret in the town that Miss Allison and Irma did not get on well together, and more than one busy gossip had declared that although Miss Allison was the girl's protector, yet once in a while she acted as if she fairly hated the sight of her.

"Yes, but I never heard that they ever had any trouble—that is not to fight, or anything of that kind," the other said.

"By gosh! it 'bout brought my heart right up in my mouth," the young man declared.

"Yes, it pretty near scar'd me out of a year's growth!"

"I don't hear anything now."

The other listened intently for a moment.

"No, neither do I. I guess it wasn't anything."

Then the two proceeded on their way.

When they arrived at the next house, which was only a little way up the road, on the opposite side of the way from Miss Allison's cottage, they noticed the figure of a man reclining in the shade of some bushes.

"Gosh!" cried Van Riper, "jest look there, Jonathan! If there ain't Perry Holdback, snoozing right under the bushes, where he will be likely to catch his death of cold!"

Peregrine Holdback was the village butcher, also the local constable, a well-to-do man, but with one great failing. He liked his liquor, and was one of the best patrons of the town bar-room, which was located in the hotel, and was the mainstay of the establishment.

Perry, as he was usually called, was an "old soaker," but although given to drink after business hours, yet he generally managed to get home all right.

On this occasion the load had been too great though; he had managed to reach his gate, but was not able to get inside, and had gone to sleep under the shelter of the bushes.

"Say! it is a shame to let him say there!" Van Riper declared. "Let us get him up and put him in the house."

"All right! I think we ought to."

The two approached the sleeping man and gave him a good shaking.

The drunkard, who was a short, thick-set, bandy-legged fellow, sat up and rubbed his eyes, and the others saw at once that his nap had pretty well sobered him.

"You'll ketch your death of cold out here in the grass!" Van Riper warned.

"Oh, that is all right, boys," the constable responded, rising slowly to his feet. "A little thing like this will not hurt a tough old rooster as I am. I frollered the sea for years, you know, and I am jest as tough as a pine knot. Say, boys, don't give this thing away. Holy smoke! I must have had a fearful jag on not to be able to get inside my own gate, but that durned Penny's whisky is ernuff to turn the hair on a yaller dog, anyhow!"

"You are all right now?" Schoville asked.

"Oh, yes; although my head feels queer and I am a little sick at my stomach; but I will be all right in a minute or two. It is all on account of Penny's bad licker. I can drink a gallon of good stuff, and walk off like a gentleman!"

"By the way, Jonathan and me heered a funny thing jest now," the country boy said, and then he proceeded to tell about the cry of alarm and the muffled shriek.

Holdback was just enough under the influence of liquor to feel that the dignity of his office required him to look into this matter.

"See here, boys, I am afraid that there is something wrong," he declared. "Jest as I came out of the house to go down-town this evening Miss Allison and Irma had a fearful row, and I distinctly heered the old woman tell the gal not to threaten her. My old woman was standing at the door with me, and she heered it too, and she sat at the time that she wouldn't be a mite surprised if them two came to scratching and hair-pulling one of these days."

The young men looked alarmed; they had not calculated upon the constable taking any such idea as this into his head.

"Oh, I reckon 'tain't anything," Van Riper said. "We didn't hear nothin' arter that, although we waited to see."

"How do you know that the gal hain't killed the old woman?" the constable demanded. "Sich things have been done many a time! It is my dooty to look into it, and as an officer of the law I command you to go along with me."

The pair looked dreadfully scared, but the emphatic manner in which Holdback uttered the sentence made them think that they had to go, and so they accompanied him.

All was dark about the house as the three came up the front walk; no light visible, no signs of life.

The constable knocked loudly with his clinched fist on the door.

In a few moments a window in the south side of the house was opened and Irma's voice asked:

"Who is there?"

"It is me, Holdback! come down and open the door right away, I command you!" cried the man, in a tone of authority.

The girl closed the window.

The three had peered around the corner of the house when the girl looked out of the casement, and so had a good view of her.

"Did you notice, boys, that she is all dressed?" the constable exclaimed, in a hoarse whisper. "She ain't got out of no bed, you know, and put on her clothes, for she ain't had time. Oh, I tell you, something is wrong!"

The others nodded in a scared sort of way, and in their hearts they wished they were well out of this scrape.

It did not take more than a minute for the girl to reach the door.

She had a lamp in her hand, and it was with a pale and careworn face that she greeted the three.

"Where is Miss Allison?" Holdback asked, abruptly.

"She has retired to rest, I presume," replied Irma, evidently astonished by the manner of Holdback. "I do not really know, though, for I have not seen her since about eight o'clock when I went up-stairs to my room."

"Better call her," the constable declared.

"Is it necessary to disturb her?" the girl asked in surprise.

"Yes, you must remember that I am the constable, and it is your dooty to do as I tell you!" Holdback exclaimed, in a pompous way.

The girl looked bewildered.

"Certainly, if you require it."

"I do! Leave the lamp with me, you won't need it!"

The officer knew that Miss Allison slept in the front chamber over the parlor.

The girl hurried up-stairs; they heard her knock at the door, first timidly, then loudly, and then, finding that there was no reply, she opened the door and entered.

The moon shone in at the windows, so there was plenty of light.

They heard the girl give an exclamation of surprise, and then she hastened to the head of the stairs.

"She isn't up here; perhaps she has fallen asleep in the sitting-room; I have known her to do so over a book," Irma declared.

Holdback knew where the sitting-room was, and immediately proceeded to it, the young men keeping close in his rear, as pale as ghosts.

Upon the lounge Miss Allison lay, still in death.

"Great Heaven! she is dead!" Holdback blurted out the moment he made the discovery.

"Dead!" cried Irma, standing on the threshold.

"Yes, she is dead; and to my notion that gal has murdered her!" the constable exclaimed. "Here is a handkerchief with the smell of chloroform still on it, and there are marks on the throat as if she had been strangled. We must not let her escape! and one of you go for Squire Postlewaite!"

The fearful web, indeed, was closing around the helpless girl, who now had fallen on the floor at the door in a dead faint.

CHAPTER VI.

GIVING THE ALARM.

HOLDBACK knew enough of the law to understand that nothing in the house must be disturbed until the arrival of the proper authorities, and this fact he impressed upon the young men, but they had no idea of interfering, and were only too glad to be able to retire from the room where the tragedy had taken place.

The three carried the senseless girl to the house of the constable, where he routed his wife out of her bed, told her what had occurred, and gave the girl into her care.

"If she wants to go away when she comes to, don't let her, 'cos she is under arrest," he cautioned, with all the swelling dignity that pertained to his important office.

"Lawks! how kin I help it?" the wife demanded. "I ain't no constable, if you are, and I should be afeard to touch her, fer she might choke the life out of me, too!"

"Brace up, and be a man—or if you can't be a man, be as much of a one as you kin!" the husband exclaimed. "Take her shoes off, then she can't go far," he added, with all the craft of the veteran thief-catcher.

"I will take all her clothes off and put her to bed; then I'll hide 'em, so she can't stir a peg!" the woman declared, taking her cue from the man.

Holdback said this would do; then he got out his horse and wagon and dispatched the two young men to notify the justice of the peace and coroner, who were near neighbors.

"Better stop for Doctor Merriwether, too, 'cos he will be wanted," he added, as the wagon departed.

Then he went across the street to keep watch on the house, but he did not care to go inside where the dead woman lay on the lounge, staring upward, open-eyed.

Abel Postlewaite, justice of the peace, was a substantial farmer who lived a couple of miles west of the village, and his next neighbor above, Michael Maginnes, the blacksmith, was the coroner.

The two men were roused, made acquainted with the tragedy that had taken place, and they were duly horrified.

"Perry said we had better get Doctor Merriwether, too," Van Riper remarked, when the two were in the wagon, and he took up the lines.

"Yes, by all means!" Postlewaite declared. "We cannot get on without the doctor. His house is right on our way, too."

But when they arrived at the physician's residence they found that he was not at home.

"Old man Bindley on the North Road has had a stroke, and the doctor was up there."

"We can go 'round by way of Bindley's; it will not take us much out of our way," the magistrate remarked.

Twenty minutes' drive brought them to the house of the farmer.

The doctor and Lawyer Foxcroft were on the stoop just taking leave of the afflicted family, for "old man Bindley" had crossed the dark river to the unknown land.

Both of the men were astounded at the intelligence conveyed to them by the magistrate.

"The girl, Irma, suspected of having murdered the woman!" Foxcroft exclaimed. "Oh, to my thinking the accusation is utterly ridiculous!"

Then the young men eagerly related what they had heard.

"Oh, yes, yes, boys, but that is no proof at all!" the old lawyer replied. "The words may have been uttered when the woman was delirious, and knew not what she was saying. To my thinking the idea is monstrous! I had a business interview with Miss Allison to-night and she did me the honor to ask my advice in regard to her affairs, and though she and the girl did not get on very well together, yet from what she said to me to-night I am satisfied that there would have been a better understanding between the two in the future."

"Yes, but it seems to me that things look very black against the girl now," Postlewaite remarked.

The justice was a steady, methodical sort of a man, a good farmer, though extremely "set"

and obstinate, but no more fit to hold the office of magistrate than to teach Hebrew.

"Ooo! not at all!" Maginnes declared. He was a shrewd, warm-hearted Irishman, and a great admirer of Miss Irma's talent. "This is all circumstantial evidence, do ye mind, justice, an' there's been many a good, innocent man hanged by that same blaggard, circumstantial evidence! That wee bit of a slip of a gurl strangle a big, powerful woman like Miss Allison! Oh, it is nonsense! Miss Allison c'u'd handle three like her, an' not be afther half tryin', either!"

"But these young men say that Holdback is positive that the girl is the criminal," the justice observed, his natural doggedness leading him to go contrary to his companions.

"Oh, Holdback is an ass!" the lawyer exclaimed, contemptuously. "His brains are so muddled with liquor that he is not capable of forming a correct opinion. If he performed his duties as constable as he ought to, he would be under the unpleasant necessity of putting himself in the jail two-thirds of the time."

"That would be rather a novelty for a constable to arrest himself," the doctor remarked.

The physician was a young man, under thirty, a good doctor, and a splendid fellow personally; between himself and the lawyer there existed the warmest friendship.

"But let us get off and look into this matter as soon as possible," Foxcroft said. "It is a strange thing, for Miss Allison sent for me to-night because she had a presentiment that she was not long for this world. It is merely a coincidence, of course, but it is extremely odd."

The rest agreed to this, and then they all drove off.

Foxcroft and the doctor had their own conveyance, and they followed in the rear of the wagon.

The party found Holdback pacing up and down in front of the cottage, and he was somewhat astonished when he saw that the old lawyer was in the party.

He did not like Foxcroft. Since he had been constable, he had exceeded his duties, and made some bad blunders, for which the lawyer had made him pay dearly.

"It is all right, justice," he remarked, as the new-comers alighted. "I have kept careful watch. Not a soul has entered the cottage—nothing has been touched—everything is just as I found it, and the gal murderer is a prisoner over to my house, with my wife a-looking arter her. Her clothes have been taken away so she kin not escape."

"Have you a warrant for her arrest?" asked the old lawyer, sharply.

"No, but I reckon I don't need no warrant when I ketch a gal red-handed, as I did this one!" the constable cried, angrily.

"Ah! you saw her commit the deed?" demanded Foxcroft.

"No, I reckon nobody didn't see her, but I know she did it, all the same," the man replied, sulkily.

"You had better be careful, or you will have to answer a charge of false imprisonment the first thing you know. You overstep your authority too often, and will be brought up with a round turn one of these days!"

"Wal, I ain't setting up to know more law than you do, in course," the constable declared, alarmed by the threatening manner of the lawyer. "I only did what I thought was for the best."

"When the girl recovers and asks for her clothes you give them to her," Foxcroft said, shortly. "It will be time enough to take measures to prevent her from escaping when she shows an inclination to run away, which does not seem to be the case at present."

CHAPTER VII.

THE EXAMINATION.

The party entered the house, the constable bringing up the rear.

"This is the way to the sitting-room, gentlemen," the old lawyer, remarked, taking the lead.

The lamp had been left in the room and, with solemn faces, the men filed into the apartment where lay the dead woman.

"We want to proceed decently and in order in this 'ere thing," the squire observed. "But as this is the first murder case that I have had I don't know as I am exactly posted in regard to the forms." Then he looked at Foxcroft as though he desired his advice.

"The first thing to be done is to have the doctor make an examination so as to determine the cause of the death," the lawyer remarked. "The woman may have died from natural causes, and if that should prove to be the case then the murder theory would vanish into thin air."

"Don't you smell the chloroform?" the constable demanded. "I reckon nobody kin fool me on that! 'cos I have used a sight of the stuff in a holler tooth that I have got!"

"There is a faint smell in the room which seems to come from chloroform," the doctor remarked.

"There's a handkerchief, gen'lemen, right on

the lounge, side of the head, what has had the stuff onto it, if I'm any judge!" Holdback exclaimed.

Merriwether examined the handkerchief. "Yes, most certainly there has been chloroform on this article," he announced.

"And jest look at the red marks on the throat!" the constable cried, hastening to bring the lamp as he spoke, so that the doctor could have plenty of light for the examination. "Don't it look as if somebody had grabbed her by the throat and choked her like thunder?"

The doctor made a careful examination, the rest watching him with eager curiosity.

Merriwether did not speak until he completed his task.

"Well, gentlemen, it certainly appears as if there has been foul play here," he said, gravely. "Of course, I cannot speak with absolute certainty without a thorough examination, in which I shall require the assistance of another surgeon, but I do not hesitate to say that it is my opinion that there has been an attempt to stupefy the woman by holding a handkerchief saturated with chloroform, or some drug similar in its nature, to her nostrils. She was probably in a doze when the attempt was made, and the operation woke her. Chloroform does not act immediately, gentlemen, when applied in this way, contrary to the general opinion; it does not produce immediate insensibility, but requires a few moments, sometimes minutes, to operate, according to the constitution of the patient. In my judgment, the attempt to use the drug roused her from her slumbers, and she struggled against the effort, and then it was that she uttered the cry that was heard by these two young men. The assailant, perceiving that the drug had not overpowered her senses, seized her by the throat and forcibly choked her, so as to allow time for the drug to work, but the assailant made a miscalculation in regard to the amount of force used and strangled the woman to death, probably imagining that as her struggles grew weaker it was the chloroform producing the effect."

This announcement made a great impression, and for a few moments the listeners looked at each other with grave faces, and then at the dead woman, who, with her distorted features, presented a horrible sight.

"Miss Allison was one of your patients, I believe, doctor?" the lawyer said, breaking the silence.

"Yes."

"What was her physical condition?"

"Most excellent, excepting that at times she was troubled with malaria."

"She was a strong, healthy woman?"

"Yes," responded the doctor, who plainly understood what the old lawyer was aiming at. "I may say remarkably so. During one of my visits she was busy house-cleaning, and I saw her lift a heavy stove which would have taxed all my powers, and I am not considered to be a weak man."

"Unless taken by surprise, with her senses and physical powers weakened by a drug, do you consider that she would be able to hold her own against an ordinary man?"

"Yes; most undoubtedly."

"You have attended Miss Irma, I presume?"

"Yes, she too was troubled by malaria, which was prevalent this summer."

"Was she physically, in your opinion, a match for Miss Allison?"

"Decidedly not!" the doctor replied, in the most emphatic manner. "Miss Allison was much the larger woman in every way, and, in my judgment, far superior in strength."

"Bedad! that is phat I was after sayin' right in the beginning!" exclaimed Maginnes, unable longer to keep quiet.

"Wal, if it wasn't the gal what choked her, what did she mean by yelling out her name?" the constable demanded. "And the light a-burnin' right in the room, too, a-going at full tilt!"

"How do you know that?" cried the lawyer, in his sharp way.

"You ain't right there, Holdback!" Van Riper cried, "'cos don't you remember you took the light out of Miss Irma's hand when you came in?"

"Yes; but there was a light burning on the table, too."

All eyes were turned to the table.

There was a lamp upon it, but it was not lit.

"You are away off there, Holdback!" young Schoville remark, encouraged to speak by the example of his companion. "There wasn't any light in the room when we came in; you had the light in your hand."

"Oh, yes; that is certain!" Van Riper declared.

"Wal, mebbe I ain't right 'bout that," the constable remarked, reluctantly. "But I assure you, gen'lemen, I didn't mean to tell no lie about the matter, 'cos I ain't that kind of a man, and I ain't anxious to fix the thing on the gal; all I am arter is to git at the truth."

Despite this protestation, the rest did not believe him.

The constable's character was well-known; an ignorant bigot, and, like the majority of his class, he was quick to jump to a conclusion and

stick to it obstinately, even if the facts in the case were so plain that any man with ordinary common sense ought to perceive that a mistake had been made.

Foxcroft was quick to perceive that this lamp incident was an important one, and so he proceeded to examine into it.

The one strong point against Irma was the exclamation made by Miss Allison and overheard by the young men; but now the acute lawyer thought he saw a way to break the force of the testimony.

"Where were you two gentlemen when you heard Miss Allison cry out?" he asked. "Please be particular and try to remember the exact circumstances," he added, "for the matter is a most important one, and your testimony is of the utmost consequence."

"Yes, sir, we understand that," Van Riper said. "That is, I do, and I suppose Jonathan does, too."

"Oh, yea!" the other young man exclaimed. "I understand it, and you may be sure I shall do my best to state all the circumstances just as they are."

"That is what is wanted—the actual facts!" the lawyer remarked, impressively. "Now, then, where were you two when you heard Miss Allison cry out?"

"In the middle of the road, just north of the house," Van Riper replied.

"Yes, that is right," Schoville assented. "We had just passed the house, but were not more than a couple of yards beyond it."

"And you are quite certain that it was Miss Allison's voice that you heard, and that she said the exact words which you repeated?" the old lawyer asked, in a solemn and impressive way.

"Yes, sir, I, for one, am certain that it was Miss Allison who cried out, and she said exactly what we told. I know Miss Allison well, for I supplied her with butter and vegetables, and used to talk with her two or three times a week," Van Riper declared, in the most positive manner.

"Yes, and as I have been with Thomas twenty or thirty times when he has stopped here, I, too, am used to hearing her talk, and I know that it was her voice that we heard," the other young man declared.

"You are positive about the words, too?" Foxcroft asked.

"Yes, sir, it is just as we said," Schoville answered, firmly.

"Did you have any idea from what part of the house the cry came?" the lawyer questioned.

"No, sir," Van Riper replied.

"I guess we were too scared at the moment to think about that," Schoville observed. "I know that I was."

"You halted upon hearing the cry?"

The young men nodded assent.

"And looked at the house?"

Again they nodded.

"Any lights visible?"

"No, sir, all was dark," Van Riper replied.

"Did you notice whether the window-curtains in this room were up or down?"

All within the apartment glanced at the windows.

There were two; one looked out toward the street, the other, in the side wall, upon the garden.

Both the curtains—and they were heavy, thick, opaque ones—were down.

"I think they were down, just as they are now," Van Riper said, slowly. "In fact, I am pretty certain that they were down."

"Yes, I noticed the front curtain in particular, and I know it was just as it is now!" Schoville declared. "I will not be so positive about the side-window, because I did not have as good a view, but I think it was down."

"Now, gentlemen, the reason why I have dwelt upon this point is to make plain to you the state of this room at the time that the attack was made upon Miss Allison," the lawyer remarked, in his most impressive way. "You will observe that both these gentlemen are positive that there wasn't any light in the room, and that the curtains were down. In that case the room must have been in total darkness. How could Miss Allison have possibly told who it was that attacked her?"

This was a strong point, and the hearers looked at each other and nodded, as much as to say, "How could she indeed?" All with the exception of the constable. He had made up his mind that the girl had done the deed, and he said to himself:

"No smart lawyer is a-going to argue me out of what I know."

"The evidence shows clearly that there wasn't any previous quarrel—that is immediately before the cry was heard. I attach no importance whatever to the fact that Miss Allison and Irma had a female spat early in the evening. Any one who knows anything about the two understands that Miss Allison was rather cross-grained at times and inclined to find fault. If there had been any altercation these young men surely would have heard it as they came up the road, but they did not hear a sound until the cry rung out on the still air of the night."

"It seems to me that the affair is easily explained, an' that any man wid two eyes in his

head c'u'd be afther seein' it," Maginnes remarked. "The leddy was aslape on the lounge, some blagg'ard put the chloroform to her nose, an' thin she woke up wid her sinuses all mixed up, av coarse; the blagg'ard grabbed her by the t'r'ote an' she, in the darkness, do ye mind, bewildered, cried out like it was Miss Irma dat had holt av her."

"That is the only reasonable conclusion!" the old lawyer declared, and the rest, by their looks, assented, Holdback alone excepted.

"They can't gammon me!" he muttered in his secret soul.

"No one committed such a crime as this without a motive!" Foxcroft declared. "The girl could not derive any benefit from the death of her guardian; on the contrary it would be a terrible loss."

"But who could gain anything by attacking Miss Allison?" the squire asked, entirely befogged by this mysterious case.

"That is exactly what we have got to find out!" the lawyer declared. "The use of the chloroform would seem to indicate that it was some regular professional scoundrel who entered the house for the purpose of committing a robbery, for it is a common trick with such men to use chloroform to stupefy any one in the house so they can plunder the premises at their leisure."

"Her jewelry hain't been teched!" Holdback exclaimed at this point, glad to score one against the lawyer.

This was true; her bracelets were visible, also her watch-chain, and a costly diamond ring which she wore upon her little finger.

The lawyer rose thoroughly equal to the occasion.

"It is possible that your approach to the house scared the scoundrel off before he had a chance to plunder his victim," Foxcroft remarked. "An examination of the house though will speedily settle the question as to whether anything has been taken or not. And that reminds me. In my interview with Miss Allison to-night she confided certain documents to my care which are in the little mahogany box yonder, and I may as well take them as I have the key."

As he spoke he produced it, and approached the table on which stood the box.

As he bent to insert the key in the lock a cry of amazement came from his lips which attracted the attention of all in the room.

"Aha, gentlemen, here is what the scoundrel was after—the contents of this box! The cover has been forced open and the lock broken.

Then he threw up the cover—the box was empty.

"My suspicion was correct!" Foxcroft exclaimed. "The valuable documents which were in this box and which Miss Allison wished me to take charge of are gone!"

"What were these documents?" the squire asked.

"Papers relating to Miss Irma, and Miss Allison desired me to take them for safe-keeping, because she said there was a chance that in the future the disposition of a large amount of money might depend upon the production of the documents, and that is all I know about the matter. It certainly looks as if some one was playing the spy here, resolved to get possession of the papers, and in the attempt murdered Miss Allison."

"Perhaps when we come to examine her effects we may find some clew as to what these papers were," the squire remarked.

"It is possible," Foxcroft replied.

Then an examination of the house was made. All the doors and windows were fastened with the exception of a door in the rear of the house, which was unbolted, and the side-window in the sitting-room.

"Here are two entrances open," the lawyer remarked. "By either one an intruder could have entered the house or escaped from it."

And this discovery convinced all but the constable that the lawyer was correct in his surmise.

CHAPTER VIII.

INSNARED.

NATURALLY this strange affair created the greatest excitement in the little country town.

In due time the inquest was held.

No facts were developed beyond those which the reader already knows.

Irma gave a reasonable explanation for her being dressed when roused from her slumber by the knocking at the door.

She had taken the scolding which her guardian had given her so much to heart that she had determined to run away from Oldharbor that very night. It was her intention to wait until Miss Allison retired to rest, and then she intended to leave the house, but had fallen asleep weeping over her troubles.

From her slumbers she had been roused by the knocking.

No documents whatever were found in the house—nothing to dispel the mystery which surrounded the murdered woman. She had died as she lived, unknown.

The verdict of the coroner's jury was "murder," but there was no clew to the perpetrator of the deed.

There were many who thought with Holdback that the jury ought to hold Irma, but Foxcroft's influence, thrown in favor of the girl, was too great, and so she was spared this trial.

After the verdict was rendered, Foxcroft had an interview with Irma, and she announced to him that it was her intention to leave Oldharbor as soon as possible. She would go to New York and seek a situation.

The lawyer did not attempt to dissuade her. He knew Oldharbor and its malicious gossips well enough to be aware that the girl would have an uncomfortable time of it if she remained.

"Keep me advised of your whereabouts," he said. "And you may rest assured I do not intend to let this matter drop. I consider that the scoundrel has robbed me, and I will hunt him down if it takes me fifty years and costs a fortune."

Then he inquired how the girl's finances were, and upon discovering that she only had a few dollars, just enough to pay her fare to the city, in fact, he tendered a loan of twenty-five dollars.

She hesitated.

"Take it, my girl," he said. "I am rich, a wifeless, childless man, and have more money than I know what to do with. Regard it as a loan. You may come in for your own one of these days, and then you can pay it back to me. Another thing: you think you will be able to obtain employment in the city, but you may have to wait some time. Every Friday I will mail you a post-office order for eight dollars—I make the sum small, just enough to enable you to get along on, so that you will not feel as if a weight of obligation was pressing too heavily upon you."

Irma stammered forth her thanks, and then, woman-like, burst into tears—they were tears of joy, though.

Five days afterward the evening train carried the girl to the great metropolis.

Unsuspecting of danger, she dreamed not that her movements were watched, but the man who called himself Lawrence Paddlewick occupied a seat in the same car.

By the time that New York was reached the dusk of the evening had come.

Irma left the ferry-boat on the New York side. Mr. Foxcroft had written to an acquaintance in the city to look up a boarding-house for the girl, and it was arranged that this person should meet her as she came off the boat.

So she was not astonished at being greeted by a stout, elderly gentleman who looked like a minister.

"How do you do, Miss Allison? Come right along this way. I have a cab waiting."

Then he conducted her to a carriage and away they went.

Paddlewick was met by Soap Mackenzie.

"I did the trick!" Soap exclaimed. "Don't you admire the Tinker's get-up? The girl will never tumble!"

Irma had been insnared.

CHAPTER IX.

THE COUNTRYMAN.

On the day before the one of the inquest a stranger made his appearance in Oldharbor; he was a middle-aged man, rather stout and muscular in appearance, and looked like a well-to-do farmer, having a round, red face fringed by a scanty beard.

He put up at the hotel and registered as William Smith, New York.

To the landlord he explained that he was a man who had made his "pile" in buying country produce, but now his wife, who was from the east end of Long Island, had grown tired of living in the city, and as she had once boarded in Oldharbor and taken a fancy to the place, he had come down to find a house.

The only vacant house that the landlord could call to mind was the one where the tragedy of Miss Allison's murder had taken place.

The unfortunate woman had rented it all fully furnished, and now that she was dead there was little doubt that the landlord would be glad to get another tenant.

The stranger declared that this would just suit him. He would rather have a furnished house, and when the landlord suggested that perhaps the fact of a murder having taken place would render it undesirable, Mr. Smith laughed at the idea.

"I am not at all afraid of seeing any ghosts," he declared. "And I reckon my wife don't take any stock in such things, either. If the house suits me, and the party who owns it is willing to rent at a reasonable figure, I don't doubt that we will be able to make a trade."

Mr. Smith hunted up the owner of the property, who was an old gentleman living some five miles off, got his terms and the keys, so he would be able to examine the place.

"It will be two or three days before I can decide," he said. "For if I like the house I will send to Brooklyn for my wife and have her come down to look at it."

"Keep the keys as long as you like, and you can leave them in the post-office when you get through," the owner replied.

Never did a house-hunter make a more careful examination than this inquisitive Mr. Smith.

Not content with searching all through the inside of the place, as though he expected to find some valuables hidden away, he prowled all around the garden, and then, when he had finished his inspection, he sauntered across the way to the constable's house and got into conversation with Mrs. Holdfast.

Of course the first thing she did, after finding out what the stranger's business was in the neighborhood, was to talk about the mysterious murder of Miss Allison, and as she was one of those who held firmly to the belief that Irma was the guilty party, she had no good words for the girl.

The stranger, apparently, took a great interest in her conversation, and in a most adroit manner contrived to let her understand that he considered she was a very superior woman, and his wonder was great that she had not been summoned to testify at the inquest.

After having let the woman talk herself out, the stranger began to inquire in regard to the neighborhood; said that it seemed to him as if it was a little lonely, and then asked if the wandering vagabonds, popularly known as tramps, ever troubled the people on that road much.

The woman replied in the negative, stating that as it was a cross-road they seldom saw any tramps, who confined themselves to the main lines of travel, and to confirm this said that she had not seen a tramp for over a month, and as she did all her work in the kitchen which fronted on the street, she saw about everybody that passed.

Mr. Smith then took his departure, thanking the woman for her kindness, and she mentally set him down for being one of the nicest and brightest men she had ever met.

The stranger was one of the spectators at the inquest which was held in the Town Hall, the only building in the village large enough to accommodate the crowd which came to attend the affair.

But Mr. Smith seemed to take far more interest in watching the spectators than he did in attending to the proceedings.

One fact, by the way, was brought out at the inquest which we neglected to chronicle, and that was, the doctor's examination showed a bad bruise on the stomach of the dead woman, and it was the opinion of the medical men that this had been made by the knee of Miss Allison's assailant.

The attacker had held her down with his knee on her body while he was choking her.

This was the only part of the testimony to which the stranger appeared to pay any particular attention.

The day after the inquest Mr. Smith paid another visit to the house where the crime was committed, and this time he confined his examination to the sitting-room and the apartments which intervened between that room and the back door which had been found unbolted.

Then he went over and had another chat with Mrs. Holdfast, and they had an exchange of opinions regarding the inquest; we say it was an exchange, but it was not really so, for Mr. Smith was gallant enough to agree to everything the woman said, and when he departed her opinion of Mr. Smith was even higher than before.

That night the stranger went out for a walk; he strolled down the street in an aimless way until he got well out of the town; twice he doubled back on his track in a peculiar way, as though he had an idea that somebody was dogging his footsteps.

And this was the truth, too, but the spy was completely baffled by the movements of "Mr. Smith."

He had followed that gentleman, keeping a good distance in the rear, but still near enough so as to be able to see where he was going, and when Smith abruptly faced about, the spy was compelled to turn up a country lane, near which he happened to be, or he would have come face to face with the man he was shadowing.

He walked a little distance up the lane, so as to give time for his game to get by the lane on his return; then the spy turned and retraced his footsteps, but when he arrived on the main road again Smith was not in sight.

The spy was amazed; according to his calculation the man whom he was watching ought to be four or five hundred yards up the street; but as he was not to be seen, the spy at once came to the conclusion that he had either gone into one of the two houses that were in the neighborhood, or else left the road and cut across the fields, but whether he had gone to the right or to the left was a mystery, and the longer the spy thought about the matter the more puzzled he became.

One thing, though, was clear to him, being a shrewd fellow, for the shadow was the wily individual who answered to the name of Soap Mackenzie.

The stranger had "tumbled" to his little game; he had either discovered, or suspected, that his footsteps were being shadowed, and he had made this movement to baffle the spy.

It succeeded, too, for, after waiting a while to see if the other would make his appearance

from one of the houses, the spy took his way back to the village, cursing his ill-luck.

Mr. Smith had turned to the right hand, entered the door-yard of one of the houses, as though he intended to make a call there, but passed on by the dwelling to the field in the rear; then he made a wide *detour* and circled back to the main road again.

On he went to the eastward for a good half-mile and then doubled back on his track as before, but this time he did not see any one coming along in his rear.

"Oho, I threw the fellow off at the first trial!" he exclaimed, in accents of satisfaction. "I thought I could work the trick without any trouble. It is a much harder matter to shadow a man on country roads than in the streets of the city, where there are always plenty of people passing, among whom the spy can easily lose himself."

Then, having satisfied himself that he was not followed, the stranger turned and went on again to the eastward.

Soon the way led through a swamp with a dense growth of trees and bushes on each side of the path.

Mr. Smith examined his watch.

"I have made a close calculation," he remarked, "for this is the place, and I have hit the time to a minute."

The hoof-beats of a horse and the sound of carriage-wheels rose on the air.

"I guess that is my man," he muttered.

A buggy drawn by a single horse came round the turn of the road.

CHAPTER X.

THE DETECTIVE SPEAKS.

SMITH cast a quick glance in the rear—precaution had become a second nature to this man—then he held up his hand as a signal for the driver to pull up.

Foxcroft halted his vehicle, for it was the lawyer who drove.

"Good-evening! Is this Mr. Foxcroft?" asked Smith.

"It is," answered the other.

"Well, I think I would like to take a little ride with you. I am the party you sent for."

"Jump in," and as the big man did so, the lawyer surveyed him with curiosity.

"Now you had better turn and drive slowly down the road, and as we go on we can converse without any danger of any one being the wiser for what we say."

The lawyer obeyed the injunction, and after they were headed to the eastward, remarked:

"This is a capital idea of yours, for the way you have arranged it we will be able to have an interview without the knowledge of any one."

"Yes, sir, that was my notion. Well, Mr. Foxcroft, I am the detective from New York. The chief received your letter all right, and put me on the case. I get about all the jobs of this kind that turn up; you see I am such a gawky-looking chap that at the Central Office I am called 'The Countryman,' and I reckon the great fraternity of rascals know me better by that name than they do by my rightful appellation, which is Ephraim Solager."

"Well, Mr. Solager, I am glad to meet you."

"My name down here, by the way, is Smith—William Smith—I am stopping at the Old-harbor Hotel, a retired produce man, and I am looking for a furnished house."

"Yes, I see."

"The full information that you gave was ample for me to work on, and so I thought it would be best for me to survey the ground a little before I opened communications with you."

"You know best, of course. The chief wrote me that you would take up the case at once, and that I would soon hear from you, so, when I got your letter, I was all prepared to act upon it."

"Well, I haven't got a great deal to say. I have made a commencement, and that is about all," the detective observed with a regretful air, as though he was sorry he could not make a better report.

"It takes time, of course; I understand that."

"I arrived the day before the inquest, and as I suspected that the house where the murder took place would be for rent, I pretended to be house-hunting. So I got a chance to make a thorough examination of the premises without exciting suspicions in regard to my business here."

"It was a capital idea."

"Yes, my theory of the detective lay-out is that the more a man keeps himself and his work in the background the better he can do."

"I should certainly think so."

"What is your idea in regard to the crime?" the detective asked, abruptly.

"That the murder was committed by some man who came into the house to secure the documents which were in the mahogany box, and which Miss Allison wished me to take charge of."

"Yes, that is what I think, but how did this man know anything about the papers?"

"Well, I jumped to the conclusion that the man must have overheard the conversation between Miss Allison and myself in regard to them."

"I noticed that at the inquest you did not go into particulars regarding those papers."

"No, I could not, for I have but little knowledge of them, and then what I do know concerns Miss Irma, and has nothing to do with the crime. That is, if I made public what Miss Allison confided to me it would not have aided the jury at all in coming to a conclusion."

"How in regard to a man about my size?" the other asked, in his drawling, countrified way.

"That is a different matter entirely. The information will undoubtedly be valuable to you."

And then Foxcroft related the full particulars of his conversation with Miss Allison.

"Well, at present I can't say that this knowledge aids me much," the detective observed, slowly. "Few crimes are committed without an object; I may say that the professional criminal never commits a crime without carefully weighing all the circumstances connected with the case, and, unless there is something to be made, the risk will not be taken."

"So I should imagine."

"Now, why should any one take much trouble to steal such documents as these that are missing?" the detective asked, evidently arguing the case as much with himself as with his companion. "As far as can be seen they are of no value to anybody but the girl, Irma, and if Miss Allison was telling the truth—and it looks as if she was—they are of no particular value to the girl now, although they may be hereafter."

"That is correct."

"If we could only get a clew to the mystery which surrounds both this Miss Allison and the girl it would help us; but we will have to search for that across the water, and as we have not anything at all to go on, the job will be difficult, if not impossible. It is one of those cases where luck and accident come in. Now, it seems to me that the man who committed this crime knows something about the girl and is posted concerning the value of these documents, otherwise he would not have risked so much to secure them, although it is my opinion that he did not intend to murder the woman. He made a miscalculation in regard to that."

"That is my belief, also that of Doctor Merrivether."

"The man has got the papers; ran a fearful risk to get them, and yet, according to Miss Allison's statement, they are of no use to anybody but the girl."

"Correct."

"Where is he going to come in?" asked the detective, shrewdly. "I am satisfied from what information I have already obtained that the man who did this job is an extra good one, and he is no amateur, either, but a regular professional—you understand what I mean—a man who makes a regular business of crime."

"Yes, I comprehend."

"Well, such a man as this does not risk his liberty without he can see a chance to profit by it. He either knows the value of the documents—and that carries with it the assurance that he was acquainted with Miss Allison's secret—not impossible, you know, or else he, in some way, got the impression that the papers were much more valuable than they really are; but I do not think that is likely, for it is my impression that this fellow is a regular high-flyer, a top-roller, so to speak."

"Now you have excited my curiosity," the lawyer remarked. "You commenced by saying that you hadn't gained much information, a circumstance which does not surprise me in the least, for I don't see as you have anything to go on, and yet you announce with the air of a man who is perfectly satisfied in regard to the matter that the criminal is so and so."

"Ever hear the story of the old Arab who described the blind and lame camel which he never saw, on account of noticing that one footprint was fainter than the other three and that the animal nipped the bushes on one side of the way and not on the other?"

"Yes; I have read the legend."

"Well, I have worked out my puzzle in the same way. The man is a regular professional because he used chloroform to stupefy his victim; common tramps, or men who stumble into crime on the impulse of the moment, don't go around with a bottle of chloroform in their pockets," the detective explained. "Then the mahogany box was forced open with a jimmy, you understand? the housebreaker's favorite tool—a small lever, capable of exerting tremendous force, and a first-class jimmy, such as an A No. 1 cracksman carries, is made of steel and is in two pieces, so that it can be easily stowed away in a coat-pocket. With one of these little jokers, a man who knows how to use the tool has not much trouble in forcing open a window or a door secured by ordinary fastenings. Of course, it was only child's play for such a man with such a tool to crack the mahogany box. There are the marks plainly visible on the box where the jimmy was applied."

"Your deduction is undoubtedly correct."

"Then, I saw he was a high-roller because he

had too much sense to take the jewelry which adorned his victim. It was not worth much, anyway, and in getting rid of it a clew might be given to his identity. I think, though, that he did help himself to some money from her pocketbook, for, if you remember, she only had a couple of dollars in change in it, while from what I can learn she was in the habit of always carrying considerable money, twenty-five or thirty dollars, as she invariably paid cash on the nail for everything she bought."

"Yes, but as no one knew anything positive in regard to this it was not possible to tell."

"This man was used to calculating all chances of this kind. The jewelry might be traced, the money could not be. Now, the conversation between you and Miss Allison took place in the same room where she was killed?"

"Yes."

"You both spoke, I presume, in an ordinary tone?"

"We did; in fact, at one time, when I gave her my opinion in pretty plain words, I rather think I raised my voice a little, for I was a little heated at the time."

"Were the curtains of the windows up or down?"

"Down."

"The side window in particular, the one which was found unfastened?"

"Down, I am sure."

"Then if a man had been playing the spy outside of that window you could not have seen him?"

"No."

"Well, the man who did the job was outside that window, where he undoubtedly heard every word that was said, and here is the proof."

The detective drew from his pocket three slender twigs, bent and half-broken in eight or ten places.

"I don't exactly understand," Foxcroft observed.

"Just outside that window is a large bush; under that bush, which concealed him from the view of any one passing along the road, the man crouched. There are the marks of his footprints in the soil, although as the ground is rather hard the marks are extremely faint, only the heel being visible, and the heel is a narrow cityfied heel, the heel of a man who wears good shoes, not the broad, flat heel of the cheap article."

"You are a close observer!" exclaimed the lawyer, profoundly impressed with the ability of the other.

"That is my business, you know," the detective replied, in his slow, deliberate way. "The man who hunts humans must learn to keep his eyes open for signs of his game just as much as the sportsman in the woods or on the prairie."

"Yes, that is undoubtedly true."

"The fellow is a nervous devil, one of those men who find it difficult to keep quiet, and as he crouched in ambush, his hands played with these twigs, which he twisted off the bush and finally dropped to the ground, and, to my thinking, the chances are a hundred to one that the man was not aware of what he was doing. He was listening with the utmost attention to the conversation between you and the lady, and, in all probability, doing a heap of thinking as to how he could turn the affair to his advantage, so he was not conscious that his fingers were fooling with these twigs, for, I take it, he is too smart a fellow to leave such a clew behind him, but the smartest of them make just such mistakes, for if they did not we detectives could never nail 'em."

"Well, it seems to me that you have managed to gain considerable information despite your statement to the contrary."

"Yes, but it doesn't amount to much, about all supposition you know," the other replied, modestly. "Well, I reckon I have found out all that is to be discovered at present. I think I know a few things. First, the job was done by a professional cracksman, a tiptop High Toby man too; he hid under the bush, and after Miss Allison went to sleep, climbed in through the window; there is a slight mark on the side of the house, which looks as if his shoes scraped off some of the paint as he climbed in; it is possible, you know, that the curtain was not completely down. There might have been a space at the bottom through which he could look into the room."

"Oh, yes, that is probable," the lawyer assented. "I am sure the curtain was down, but if it had been up an inch or so at the bottom the chances are that I would not have noticed it."

"Now I have narrowed the field down a little. A tiptop professional did the job, and, as such men seldom work alone, the chances are that he has one or two pals, so there are two or three men for me to look after, and the more men in the 'mob' the greater my chance, and then too the field of operations being located in the country is in my favor, for it is not so easy for rascals to find a hiding-place as it is in the city. They are strangers undoubtedly, and strangers are always sharply watched by these inquisitive country people."

"Oh, yes, it seems to me that you ought to be able to spot them."

"If they remain here—which I am sorry to say is not likely," the detective remarked with a grimace. "The job is done, and the principal probably taken flight, leaving a pal behind to see how the inquest goes—whether any discoveries directing suspicion to him are made. And this pal is the man who shadowed me to-night."

"It looks like it."

"And this shadow business bothers me," the detective remarked. "How on earth did the man catch on so quick? I flatter myself that I haven't made any blunders. I have not acted in such a way as to attract attention to me, or to even make the sharpest rascal suspect that I am anything but what I represent myself to be."

"It may be some man who knows you—some scoundrel whom you have worried," the lawyer suggested.

"That is the only reasonable explanation, and to-morrow I shall proceed to make it my business to look after all the strangers in the town, but there have been so many people here during the last few days, for this murder has brought the country people in for a good fifty miles, that it has not been possible to do anything in that line."

"To-morrow the village will probably settle down, and then you will have a chance."

"Yes, if my man is fool enough to remain here, but I am giving him the credit to think that he is too smart to do anything of the kind," the detective replied. "I will make a careful examination, of course, but it is my idea that the whole business is going to be transferred to New York. I speak on the supposition that Miss Irma is going to the city; I heard talk to that effect in the hotel."

"That is correct."

"We must keep an eye on her, for sooner or later the man who stole the documents will put himself in communication with the girl."

"That matter can be easily arranged," Foxcroft observed. "The girl's friendless and unprotected state has excited my sympathy, and I have resolved to do all I can for her. I have written to a friend of mine in New York to look after her, and I shall run up to the city every now and then to see how she gets on."

"That will do nicely!" the detective observed. "I fancy that this case will be a long and difficult one, but if you are disposed to stick to it, I think that in the end I can nab my man."

"Yes, I have enlisted for the war, and I will stick if it takes ten years!" Foxcroft replied, with firm determination.

And this brought the interview to a close.

The lawyer drove the detective back to Old-harbor by a back country road, and then they parted.

CHAPTER XI.

A CUNNING TRICK.

BEAMISH AND McCUAUL was one of the old established law firms of New York. They belonged to the class known as real-estate lawyers, and had a large and valuable practice.

Jacob Foxcroft was a cousin of Douglas Beamish, the senior partner of the firm, and it was to this gentleman that the country lawyer wrote when he desired to recommend Irma to the kind offices of some one in the city.

As it happened, Mr. Beamish was laid up with a severe cold when the letter arrived, and so could not attend to the matter in person, although he wrote back that he would see that the lady was met on the New York side of the ferry.

To his nephew, Richard Beamish, a clerk in his office, he delegated the duty of meeting Miss Irma, turning over to him the photograph, which Mr. Foxcroft sent, of the lady, and the letter wherein her attire was described.

The elder Beamish was a sober and steady-going man, and he believed his nephew to be a truly moral and reliable young fellow; but, like many another canting hypocrite, the clerk wore the livery of the Lord to serve Satan in.

In the office he was apparently the steadiest fellow possible; outside of the narrow confines of the "den," as he termed it, he was a high-roller of the first water; his tastes ran in the direction of the "turf," and the various "pool-rooms" of the metropolis, where the betting-men were wont to congregate, had no more constant patron than Dick Beamish.

Of course, as a natural consequence, he was "hail fellow, well met," with as disreputable a set of "touts," as the horse-racing prophets are termed, blacklegs and sharpers of all degrees, as New York could boast.

The man led two lives. In the office he was a model clerk, exact, punctual and diligent. After office hours, freed from restraint, he was a hard-drinker, and a reckless man about town.

To make the acquaintance of such a man was an easy matter for a smooth-tongued, oily-mannered stranger, who, apparently, met him by accident at one of the up-town drinking-saloons, much patronized by the followers of the turf.

The two soon got on intimate terms, for the stranger was well provided with money, which he was disposed to spend, and Dick Beamish just then was rather under a cloud. He had backed

a dark horse to win in a certain race, a stable tip from a friendly tout, who swore the animal would astonish the crowd, and so he did, particularly those who had been unwise enough to bet on him, for he was so truly a dark horse that he was never seen in the race at all, being beaten out of sight by the rest.

This stranger, then, with his big roll of bills, and disposition to have the best in the house for himself and friend, soon won Dick Beamish's admiration and confidence.

Then, after the clerk was well-primed with drink the stranger suggested a private room and a little game of cards.

Beamish gladly consented, for he had everything to gain and nothing to lose.

The clerk was favored by fortune and managed to win some twenty odd dollars, which, as he admitted to his new-made friend after the game ended, would come in deuced handy, as he was short of cash.

During the game liquor had been served regularly, and the pair had a jovial time.

The stranger in the frankest manner possible had said that his name was Reddy Gallagher, and he was a sport in all that the name implies, depending upon horse-racing, gambling and kindred amusements for his support, and this confession which would have made the average man look upon the stranger with suspicion, elevated him to the rank of a hero in the eyes of the dissipated clerk.

It was just the kind of life that he would like to lead—to be a successful sport, and gain wealth galore.

And he confided this desire to his companion, who encouraged him, saying that he would take him under his tutorage; all he needed was a few points now and then, and, no doubt, he could astonish the sporting world.

From such a kind and affable friend the misguided young man could have no secrets, and so he freely revealed all that he had to tell in regard to himself, even spoke of the mission intrusted to him by his confiding uncle, and exhibited the photograph of the girl and the letter of description sent by the lawyer.

"Going to meet her to-morrow night, eh?" exclaimed the other. "Well, now, you are in luck, I must say, for she is a deuced pretty girl, and I envy you her acquaintance. If she only had some tin she would be just the kind of woman I would like to make Mrs. Gallagher, but I couldn't afford to tie myself to any girl unless she has plenty of money."

"Well, this one wouldn't suit you, for she is as poor as a church mouse, and she comes to the city to get a chance to earn a living."

"Yes, so I see by the letter. I suppose your respected boss has secured a boarding-place for her?" Gallagher remarked, carelessly.

"You're right; she is going to the house where our typewriter boards in Fourth avenue, near Tenth street."

"Hang me! if I wouldn't like to have a look at the girl!" and the speaker gazed with admiration at the picture.

"That can be arranged easily enough," Dick Beamish declared. "Meet me at the Thirty-fourth Street Ferry to-morrow, and you shall not only see her, but I will give you an introduction."

"I shall be delighted!" the other declared. And then he insisted upon standing a bottle of wine as a token that he appreciated the friendship of the other.

While they were enjoying the wine Mr. Gallagher made a suggestion.

"Instead of meeting at the ferry suppose you come to my rooms," he said. "I keep bachelor's hall on Fourth avenue, near Twenty-seventh street. We can have a little game of cards and a drink or two, if you come early enough, and then we can go to the ferry."

Beamish was so much impressed by his new acquaintance that he was ready to agree to almost anything, and the matter was arranged in that way.

The young man kept the appointment at four o'clock on the following day, and was received by the genial Mr. Gallagher in the warmest manner.

Cards were produced, and a bottle of brandy accompanied by a syphon of mineral water.

"This, I think, is an improvement on the English drink of brandy and soda," the host explained. "I have got to be very fond of it and keep the materials constantly on hand."

Beamish was just in the state of mind to be satisfied with almost anything, and expressed himself to that effect.

The two sat down to their game; they did not neglect the liquor during the progress of it, and the result was that at six o'clock the clerk was so much under the influence of the strong drink that he could neither walk nor talk; in fact he was in the state which is popularly known as "dead drunk."

Gallagher had apparently drank as much as his guest, but, in reality, he had not, having cunningly contrived to spill two-thirds of his liquor on the floor.

When Beamish became perfectly helpless Gallagher deposited him upon the sofa and quitted the room, locking the door securely behind him, although, as he muttered to himself,

there was not much need of taking that precaution, for Beamish was so much overcome by the liquor that there was not much danger of his moving for five or six hours.

When Gallagher descended to the street, he found a coupé at the door, which he entered and was driven to the Thirty-fourth Street Ferry.

There he descended from the carriage and met Soap Mackenzie.

"Done the trick all right?" Soap questioned.

"Oh, yes, it was as easy as rolling off a log," Gallagher answered with a chuckle. "The man is about the softest flat for a city chap that I ever struck. I have the letter and the photograph, and there will not be any trouble about doing the job up brown."

We have already related how successfully the scheme worked—how easily the unsuspecting country girl, Irma, was snared.

In fact, if she had been an old and experienced woman of the world she could not have helped falling into so cunningly a devised trap.

Gallagher, the Tinker, was one of the best men in the bunco business; men of years and vast business experience had fallen a victim to his wiles, and a better man to inspire confidence could hardly have been found in all New York.

He had such a genial way—such a benevolent manner, that it is no wonder he was so successful in his peculiar vocation.

As the carriage rolled along he entered into conversation with Irma; explained that Mr. Beamish was laid up with a cold and had deputed him to act in his place.

"I am going to take you to the house where the lady who used to be our typewriter lives. She married and retired, and Mr. Beamish, knowing that you came to the city to seek a situation, thought it would be a good idea for you to learn typewriting from her, as typewriters are always in demand."

"Yes; I have read so, but I am afraid I shall not be able to afford the expense of taking lessons," Irma replied.

"Oh, that will be all right," Gallagher exclaimed. "The lady is my sister, and she is willing to wait for her pay until you secure a situation. Her house is in Jersey City, and it is only a short distance from the ferry, we will not need the carriage after we reach the ferry-house."

And on this programme the pair proceeded.

At the Jersey City ferry they left the coupé and entered the boat, which, a minute after, started on its trip.

Gallagher chuckled quietly to himself.

"Blessed if this thing isn't running as smoothly as if it was greased," he muttered. "It takes a man about my size to do the trick every time!"

But there is an old saying that man proposes and Fate disposes, and the Tinker had not counted upon the chance that Providence might interfere to save the orphan girl from the snare in which she had become entangled.

The night was a dark one; a heavy fog covered the surface of the water, and when the boat was in midstream it was run into by a heavy tug.

The boat had a large number of passengers on board, and a fearful panic ensued.

Irma was separated from Gallagher in the rush.

The tug backed away, then endeavored to go ahead, and struck the ferry-boat a second time.

The cry arose that the boat was sinking: the passengers became a mob of howling, shrieking maniacs, half a dozen people were forced overboard, and among them was Irma.

The tide was running swiftly, and the girl was soon carried away; but she was a skillful swimmer and struck out boldly for life.

Fortune favored her. The moon came struggling through the clouds; by its light she discovered a floating log, and Irma, with steady strokes, swam bravely toward it.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BLONDE BURLESQUER.

HAVING been brought up in a town where the salt sea waters washed both the north and south sides for a dozen miles, and bathing was a popular amusement in the warm months, Irma had become an expert swimmer; the knowledge now was of great value to her in this moment of peril.

She gained the floating log without much trouble, and, as she threw her arm around one end of it, another girl came up on the other side of the log, a yard or so from Irma, and also grasped it.

Both had lost their hats in the struggle with the waves, and Irma's long black hair floated down over her shoulders.

But the stranger's hair, being short and curling in little crispy, golden ringlets all over her head, was none the worse for the plunge into the waves.

She was a good-looking girl with strongly-marked, regular features, a blonde with really beautiful dark blue eyes.

"Any port in a storm!" she exclaimed, with

wonderful coolness, as she threw her arm over the log and gave her head a toss to shake the water out of her eyes.

"Hello! you have got a reserved seat, I see!" she continued, catching sight of Irma. "Well, what do you think of this situation as far as you have got? It is pretty bad, isn't it? but it might be far worse; for instance if we were 'forty fathoms deep' in Davy Jones's locker."

The coolness and high spirits of this stranger served to restore Irma's calmness.

"Yes, we have surely escaped from a fearful peril," Irma remarked, and she could not repress a shudder as she looked around upon the waste of waters, for, as far as the two could see, there was nothing but the surface of the river walled in all around by the fog-bank.

The moon afforded light enough for the two to see each other, but the rays were not strong enough to enable them to distinguish the lights on the shores.

"I never was so disgusted with anything in my life!" the stranger declared. "Really, when you come to think of it, you must admit that the people on board of the boat could not have acted more like lunatics if they had come right out of a mad-house. I happened to be near the end of the boat, and a regular howling madman opened the gate so he could jump overboard, but a deck hand grabbed him, then there was a rush of the crowd, and the next thing I knew I was soused into the water; a ten-dollar hat gone and a twenty-five-dollar dress ruined, too, I suppose!" and the tone of the girl was one of deep regret.

"Oh, how can you think of such things when it is a question of whether we shall be rescued from our dangerous situation or not?" Irma exclaimed, in wonder.

"Why, this little picnic doesn't worry me any," the other replied, coolly. "We are all right; there isn't much danger of our passing our checks in, as a gilded youth of the period would remark. This dear old log is big enough to support a dozen, and as long as we can hang onto it we are all right. We are pretty certain to be picked up in a short time, for the river is full of boats, and some one of them will be sure to come within hailing distance before long."

"Oh, I trust so!" Irma exclaimed. "The confidence that you display gives me new life."

"That is the right way to look at the matter. 'Cheer up, Sam, never let your spirits go down,'" sung the girl, in a rich contralto voice, full of sweetness and melody.

"We are not in the middle of a big ocean," the girl continued. "If we were the case would be entirely different, and I am afraid I should be the first to snivel. And then, too, floating as we are in the middle of a river, our situation might be vastly different if the tide was running out instead of in, if it was ebb instead of flood. I presume you know the meaning of the terms?"

"Oh, yes, I was brought up on the sea-shore."

"Well, as it happened, I was one of the last to come on board the boat, and chanced to stay outside until the boat was out of the slip, and saw from the way she was forced up-stream that a strong flood tide was running, and that is the reason why I feel so easy now."

"It was fortunate that you observed it."

"Yes, although I am not one of the kind who would be apt to give way to despair, no matter how badly circumstances appear. What is the use? If you have got to die, you might as well die game as to loudly bemoan the wretchedness of your fate. You see, I am somewhat of a philosopher, if I do wear petticoats."

Hardly had the words left her lips when the sound of a vessel propelled by steam, evidently approaching, came to the ears of the girl.

"Aha! do you hear that?" the blonde exclaimed. "Didn't I tell you that we hadn't 'come to skilly yet'? There's a steamer of some kind coming, and the chances are that she will come near enough so that we will be able to make those on board hear us."

"Oh, yes, and we will be rescued!" Irma exclaimed, her pale face lighting up with joy.

"The only thing is that we must yell for our lives!" the other warned. "If you have a good pair of lungs, now is the time to call upon them to do their duty. You must scream like a tiger-cat, or else we will not be able to make the men on the boat hear us."

"I will do my best, be assured!" Irma declared.

The noise grew stronger and stronger; with anxious eyes the girls peered into the darkness.

"She is coming down the river," the blonde declared.

"Yes, I think so; but if she passes by us without our being able to make them hear our cries, will it not be dreadful?"

"Very true; and there is the other probability that she may run us down, for if she is going at good speed and strikes this log, the concussion will be apt to make us loosen our hold," the blonde remarked.

"We must pray to Heaven to avert such a calamity!" Irma exclaimed, with a shudder.

"Yes, pray to Heaven, and cling to the log with all our might, too; old Cromwell's idea, you know: 'Trust in the Lord, but keep your powder dry!'"

The boat came puffing onward, the girls straining their eyes to distinguish her lights.

"There she is ahead on the left!" cried the stranger, abruptly, the first to see the approaching craft.

"Now, dear, yell like a little man! Scream as you never did before in your life!"

And scream at the top of their lungs the two girls did.

The boat was only about a hundred feet away, and coming on at only half-speed on account of the fog, for the captain feared to run fast through the thickened gloom.

There was a good watch kept on the boat, which was a small tug, about all on board being congregated at the bow, and the screams of the two girls were heard immediately.

The boat came within fifty feet, and as soon as the captain discovered the girls he stopped the engine.

The crew were ready with ropes, and in five minutes more the two girls stood on the deck of the tug, none the worse for their adventure, excepting that they were wet to the skin.

The tug was bound for Brooklyn, and when the blonde heard this she exclaimed:

"Well, that suits me exactly, for my home is in Brooklyn."

"If you wanted to land in Jersey City, or New York, I could touch at either place without any trouble," said the tug-boat captain, who was an obliging man.

"Well, I do not," the blonde answered, "for my home is in Brooklyn, and I want to get there as soon as possible, but I do not know about this lady," and she looked inquiringly at Irma.

"I do not know what to do, or where to go," the orphan girl said. "I am a stranger in New York, without a single acquaintance. I came into the city this evening, and was met at the train by a gentleman who had been deputed by a friend of mine to get me a boarding-house, to which he was taking me when the accident occurred, and now I haven't any idea where to go."

"Come right along with me!" the blonde exclaimed in her frank, hearty way. "You are quite welcome to take up your quarters with me until you can communicate with your friends."

Irma had already taken a liking to the outspoken girl, so different from any one whom she had ever met, and so she gladly accepted the offer.

"Where are you going to land, captain?" the blonde asked.

"Near the foot of Atlantic avenue."

"That will just suit us, for I live on Flatbush avenue, near Atlantic, and we can take a car which will carry us right to the door."

The captain gave up his cabin to the two ladies, and then proceeded to start the boat.

"Well, this has been quite a romantic episode, hasn't it?" the blonde remarked.

"Yes, indeed, and we may think ourselves fortunate in having escaped without harm."

"I am out a ten-dollar hat—a regular love of a hat—the most becoming one that I ever had, and I guess this dress is about done for, but, as you say, I am thankful that it isn't any worse. By the way, we ought to know each other by this time. My name is Ernestine Herbert."

"And mine is Irma Allison."

"That is a pretty name and a rather odd one too," the other commented. "I never thought," she went on in a peculiar, abrupt way, "but I suppose I ought to have told you something about myself when I offered you the shelter of my home, yet I couldn't very well with all those men around, staring at us as though we had two heads."

"I do not understand," Irma said, puzzled.

"Well, I gather from your words that you are from the country, and you may have some country ideas about certain things."

"I am still in the dark."

"Are you a church-member?" Ernestine asked, abruptly.

"No, I am not; of course, I went pretty regularly, but I never joined."

"Well, perhaps it will not appear to be so bad to you then."

"You are speaking in riddles."

"Yes; but I can easily explain. The truth is, I am an actress."

"I am sure I do not think any the worse of you because you are one," Irma exclaimed.

"Don't you? Well, that is good! but there is a prejudice against actresses, particularly among country people who are church members and who know about as much of actresses and the theater as they do of the interior of Africa."

"Oh, yes; I understand that. In the town where I lived there were a number of people who could not be hired to go to such a sinful place—as they termed it—as a theater; but, strange to say, quite a number of these good people bore such a bad reputation among their neighbors that no one was willing to trust them for anything."

"Ah, yes; that is the old story; they wore the garb of religion to serve Satan in. But I am an actress of the worst kind. I am a blonde burlesque!"

And the girl made the announcement with the air of one who expected that her listener would be horrified.

On the contrary, Irma laughed.

"I understand what that means; I am not so green as to be ignorant, although I am from the country. You must know that I am quite an amateur actress myself. We had a dramatic club in the village, and I have acted three or four times a year for the past five years, and the audiences were kind enough to believe that I was quite an actress."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed the other, greatly interested.

"Yes; I made a great success as Yum Yum, in the Mikado."

"One of my favorite parts!" Ernestine declared. "Well, it is all right, then; as you have faced the footlights and strutted your brief hour upon the stage, you will not feel strange in accepting the hospitality of the blonde burlesque."

CHAPTER XIII.

AN EXCHANGE OF CONFIDENCE.

THE tug landed the girls at a pier near the foot of Atlantic avenue, Brooklyn, and, after thanking the captain heartily for his kindness, the two hurried away.

On reaching Atlantic avenue Ernestine spied a carriage.

"There is a coach!" she exclaimed. "And we had better take that; it will be far nicer than going home in our wet clothes in a car and have everybody staring at us as if we were some freaks escaped from a dime museum."

Irma was of the same opinion, and so the two girls got into the carriage and were driven to the home of the actress.

There they were received by Ernestine's mother, a little old lady with the whitest of hair and the sweetest of faces.

She uttered a cry of astonishment as the two girls made their appearance.

"My goodness! Whatever is the matter?" she cried.

"We have been in swimming without taking the trouble to put on bathing-dresses!" Ernestine exclaimed, in her brisk, outspoken way. "But don't ask for an explanation, mother, until we get on some dry duds, for the water is still dripping from our clothes, and, in the present state of the money market, I cannot afford to go to the expense of getting new carpets. Come into the bath-room, Irma; and, mother, hurry up with some clothes for both of us. You are about my size, Irma, and I can fit you out all right."

The actress led the way to the bath-room, while the old lady hastened to get out the clothes.

Ernestine occupied a cozy four-room flat, furnished comfortably, and everything was as neat as possible.

"Now, mother, if you will be kind enough to make us a good strong cup of tea and get out something to eat, we shall be ever so much obliged!" the actress rattled away, when her mother came with the clothes. "First, though, give us a little wine-glassful of brandy apiece. I don't know what your ideas are on temperance, Irma, but if you were the greatest prohibitionist in the world, you ought not to hesitate to take the liquor, for it is as a medicine to prevent us from taking cold after our bath that I advise it."

"I have no qualms of conscience about taking it, although I seldom drink anything of the kind, for I know that it is necessary in a case like this, for I am chilled through," Irma replied.

The liquor was brought and taken, then the girls put on dry clothes while Mrs. Herbert brewed the tea and broiled a beef-steak, so by the time that the pair completed their toilette the table was ready for them.

"Oh, my!" exclaimed Ernestine, her great blue eyes sparkling with delight as she beheld the steak, smoking upon the plate, "isn't this just the dearest little mother that there ever was in this world!"

And then she took the old lady in her strong arms and fairly lifted her from the floor in her enthusiastic embrace.

"Do be quiet, Ernestine! you act like a great tom-boy!" cried the old lady, but it was plain that she was much delighted by her daughter's hearty greeting.

Then the actress introduced Irma to her mother, and explained what had occurred; this only took a few moments, and then the three sat down to the meal.

"I am just dying to have my measure taken for a beef-steak!" the actress exclaimed.

She was always saying comical things without striving to be witty.

"It is lucky I happened to have it in the house, but I got it to-night for your breakfast, so as to save going out in the morning," the mother explained.

"I was on my way to Jersey City to see a show at the Academy," the actress observed.

"Notice, I was going to see a comedy, and accident decreed that I should take part in a tragedy."

"You were very fortunate indeed to escape with your lives," the old lady observed.

"Oh, yes, it was a close call, as a sporting-man would say," Ernestine declared. "You mustn't mind my slang, Irma; I am a regular old slang-bird! The fact is, I rattle on so heedlessly that whatever is on the tip of my tongue comes out, and I seldom stop to pick and choose my words."

"Well, I try not to use any slang," Irma remarked, "but there isn't any doubt that the common sayings of the day are wonderfully expressive sometimes."

"That is true enough!" Ernestine replied. "I suppose, Irma, you ought to send a telegram to your friends so that they will know that you are safe, for they will be sure to think that you have gone to the bottom of the river when they miss you from the boat."

"Yes, undoubtedly the gentleman I was with, who was acting as my guide, will think that I have perished when he cannot find me, but I really do not know how I can send a message to him."

The other looked surprised at this statement, and then Irma explained the circumstances.

She could not recall the name of the gentleman to whom her friend, Mr. Foxcroft, had written.

"He is a lawyer, I think," she said. "It is my impression that Mr. Foxcroft said so. He mentioned the name at the time, but I did not pay any particular attention to it, and then the gentleman who met me at the ferry-boat spoke of him, said he was not well, and had deputed him to receive me, but for the life of me I cannot recall what the name was."

"Well, now, the circumstances are exceedingly strange!" the young actress declared. "But one thing is certain; as this gentleman is a stranger to you, he will not be inclined to worry much in regard to your disappearance. It is your friend in Greenport who will be troubled when the news reaches him, but by using the telegraph you can notify him that you are all right, and as it is not probable that the party whom you were with will give you up for dead until a close examination is made, the chances are great that you can let Mr. Foxcroft know that you are all right before any information in regard to the accident reaches him."

"Yes, there is not much doubt about that," Irma remarked.

"You see that I am quite a business woman," Ernestine observed. "That is the result of the life I have led. An actress is obliged to keep her eyes open and look out for herself, or she will get left, every time! More slang you see, but oh! isn't it sweetly expressive?" and Ernestine made a comical grimace, which set the others to laughing.

"You are certainly the wildest girl that ever was!" the mother declared.

"Ah, you ought not to say that, for everybody declares that I take after you!" the daughter retorted. "But that is all right! I am only wild when I am home and in the company of friends, otherwise I am as sedate as you please. But to come back to our mutton. All you will have to do is to send a telegraph saying, 'Been in an accident, escaped safely, letter sent.' You see I understand all about telegraphing, and know that you must not put in a word that you can possible leave out. One of my telegrams was famous in theatrical circles for a while. I was out with a Mikado party on the road, business was bad, and the ghost didn't walk regularly—that is a bit of stage argot, and signifies that salaries are not paid promptly; the manager went to New York to get funds—was to be back promptly next day—didn't come; then I dispatched a message, 'No sal. no show! Yum-yum,' and it brought the man on the next train, for he knew that I meant business!"

"What ever has got into you to-night?" exclaimed the old lady. "I don't think I ever saw you so wild!"

"The beefsteak has gone to my head, I guess," the young actress replied, with another comical face. "But to come right down to solid business now. You can write a letter, explaining matters, and have your lawyer friend send you the address of the gentleman to whose care you were consigned, then everything will be all right again."

"Yes, how thankful I am that I was fortunate enough to meet you, so competent to advise me what to do!" Irma exclaimed.

"Taffy!" the young actress returned. "Now, don't say anything more like that, or you'll spoil my appetite, and I haven't had half as much of the steak as I want!" Ernestine declared.

During this conversation all had been doing justice to the supper.

"Oh, but I really do feel very grateful to you, and I am sure I shall not be satisfied until I have an opportunity to repay your kindness," Irma declared.

"Well, don't let the weight of obligations worry you much!" Ernestine exclaimed. "It is all right; I don't doubt that you would do as much for me, or anybody else, if you had the chance."

"Yes, that is true; I am always glad to be able to oblige."

"And now I am going to pry into your affairs a bit!" Ernestine exclaimed, abruptly. "For the little you have said of yourself has excited my curiosity. You know something about me and a very few words will tell you all that there is to be told. I am an actress, my father was an actor, and his father and mother before him followed the stage, so, you see, I come of an acting family, but there is only mother and I left; mother never went on the stage, first, because she wasn't built that way, and secondly, because father did not want her to. She was not on the stage when he married her, and as he always commanded a good salary there wasn't any need of her acting.

"I made my first appearance when I was a baby, two years old, and have been at it ever since. I have won a good position, command an excellent salary, have put by a good bit of money for a rainy day, and live here with mother in as snug a little home as Brooklyn can boast. When I am compelled to travel, as I am sometimes, mother stays here alone, for she is not afraid, as we have excellent neighbors, and there is my story in a nutshell."

"Well, it will not take me long to tell you my history," Irma remarked.

And then she told the story with which the reader is already familiar.

"Upon my word, if this isn't like a page out of a romance!" the young actress exclaimed when Irma finished the tale.

"Yes, but it is the truth."

"Oh, well, truth is always stranger than fiction!" Ernestine declared. "And so you, poor, little innocent country girl, have come up to this great metropolis—this second Babylon—with the idea of getting your own living?"

"Yes, and it seemed to me that this idea that the gentleman suggested of learning typewriting was a good one," Irma remarked.

"I do not think so," the young actress replied, in her quick, decided way. "There are typewriters and typewriters. I know something about the matter, for one of the ladies who was in the party I traveled with last had been a typewriter, but she was glad to give it up and take six dollars a week and her expenses to sing in the chorus. She told me about the business, and in order to be successful as a typewriter it is necessary to be very expert; and a knowledge, too, of short-hand—stenography—is desirable: it would take you six months to become capable of taking a situation, and as the supply is far greater than the demand, the salaries are low, not more than enough to live on. You might as well become a saleswoman."

"Well, it was not my idea," Irma remarked. "And I should not have thought of such a thing if this gentleman had not suggested it. My idea was to teach music."

"That is about as bad!" Ernestine exclaimed. "I had a friend, a really excellent musician, who became tired of the stage and thought she would settle down, but she found the life an extremely hard one, and although she stuck to it faithfully for a year, she only made about enough to live on, so she was glad to go back to the stage again."

"That is what I would like to do," Irma declared, her face lighting up. "I would dearly like to go on the stage. As I told you I was looked upon as a wonder in Oldharbor, and everybody said that I would be successful if I became a regular professional."

"Ah, my dear girl, there is a vast difference between shining as a bright particular star amid a lot of country amateurs and holding your own in the ranks of the regulars."

"Oh, yes, I understand that, and I did not aspire to anything but the humblest of characters, but what I thought was that the experience that I had had as an amateur would be useful to me if I should enter the profession. I have become used to the footlights, you know, and am not afraid to face an audience," Irma explained.

"You are right, it would help you. People who sit in front of the house think how easy the life of the performer is, and I have known would-be actors and actresses, great stars in their own parlors, among their friends, who have been so dumfounded when they faced an audience that they could not open their mouths."

"Yes, we had some in our club who were affected in that way, but, of course, we soon found them out and then they were not allowed to spoil the performances. I should dearly love to go on the stage, but I haven't any idea how to go about it."

"It is the old saying, 'Kissing goes by favor,' and the amateur who wants to go on the stage will have a hard time to secure an opening unless backed by wealth and influence. But I tell you what it is: if you really want to try what you can do in that line, I am pretty certain I can do something for you. I am going on the road with a Comic Opera Company which opens a week from Monday, and as I am very solid with the manager—I am to be billed as the attraction of the party—I feel sure I can get you a position. The parts will be small ones, and your salary will not be more than five or

six dollars a week and expenses—that is the manager will pay your board and railroad fare."

"Oh, I shall only be too delighted to get such a chance!" Irma exclaimed, her dark eyes sparkling with delight. "Why, I did not hope to get more than six or seven dollars a week in all."

"Well, that is one odd thing about the stage," the actress observed. "I am told that if a firm, doing a business of a million or so a year, wants a bookkeeper or a cashier, they can pick and choose from a hundred odd at eight and ten dollars a week, while on the stage we give our boot-jacks, as the utility men are termed, and chorus ladies, fifteen to twenty dollars a week, but it must be added, the life is a precarious one, and the performer who can get thirty-five weeks' work out of the fifty-two is lucky. I will take you to-morrow to see the manager, and I think the matter can be arranged."

By this time the supper had been dispatched and the party rose from the table.

Irma wrote her letter to the lawyer, and then went out with Ernestine to post it and send her telegram.

There was a telegraph-office on the next block, so the girls had not far to go.

The telegram sent, they returned home, and, just as they entered the door, a man passing by caught sight of Irma's face.

He halted, and a look of profound astonishment came over his features.

"Well, may I be jiggered!" he cried. "If that ain't the gal it is her dead image!"

The speaker was Soap Mackenzie.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MAN-HUNTER'S REPORT.

ON the same afternoon that Irma took the train for New York, Lawyer Foxcroft received a note from the detective, who rejoiced in the peculiar nick-name of The Countryman, requesting him to meet the man-hunter on the south road as he had done on the occasion of their first meeting.

Foxcroft kept the appointment and met the detective, but this time he encountered him on a small bridge which spanned the waters of a creek flowing into the bay.

The detective got into the buggy.

"You might as well walk your horse in the direction of Oldharbor, for I haven't much to say and it will not take me long," the man-hunter said.

"What success?" the lawyer asked, chirruping to his horse to start, and then allowing the animal to select his own pace, and as the horse was a staid old family beast he fell into a walk upon finding that he was not urged.

"Well, I don't know but what it is a good deal like the old saying—the best advancement I can boast of is that I have not gone backwards," the sleuth-hound replied, in his unassuming way. "The situation was changed a little, though. On the previous occasion when I set out to meet you I got the idea that my footsteps were shadowed, and so I doubled back on my tracks on purpose to catch the man. He was up to snuff, though, and avoided me by turning into a lane which was near. I gained my point, however; I satisfied myself that I was being shadowed, and I threw the fellow off the track by doubling back, so that he was not able to see what I was up to. To-night I tried the same trick, and I was a deal more careful how I worked it than I was the other time, but I did not get my man."

"Do you think there was one on your track, and that he was cute enough to be up to your little dodge?" Foxcroft asked.

"No; I should have caught him if there had been one. I do not care how skillful the man might be as a shadow, he could not have avoided falling into the trap I laid for him to-night if he had been dogging my footsteps," the detective replied.

"And what is more I am satisfied that no one has been on my track since that night."

"It is rather strange," the lawyer remarked.

"Yes, it certainly is. There are two things about the affair that bother me. In the first place, what on earth set the man after me? I am too old a hand at the business not to know that I am playing my part right up to the handle, and there isn't anything about me to excite suspicion, nor have I done anything since I came to the town to lead even the smartest rascal to suspect that I am anything but what I pretend to be."

"It is, possibly, some scoundrel who knows you?" Foxcroft suggested.

"That is the only reasonable explanation. As a rule, I always keep in the background. I work a case up, and then let somebody else do the nabbing. Once in a while, though, the circumstances are such that I have to put the darbies—handcuffs, you know—on a man myself, and so a few rascals know me, and it is my opinion that one of these men was in the town and spotted me as soon as I arrived."

"It appears to be probable."

"That is the way of it, I think. The fellow, though, has been smart enough to keep out of my sight, for I have not been able to discover a single soul in the town that I ever met before."

"Well, it was your opinion that this crime was committed by a regular professional criminal?"

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that, and I have come to the conclusion that the man must have got out of the town immediately after committing the crime, leaving this man, who dogged me, to see what hue and cry would be raised about the matter, and this fellow, when he discovered that I was on the ground, gave leg-bail, too."

"You see, the inquest was over, and all the testimony in regard to the affair had been produced, so there wasn't any need of the spy remaining in the village any longer. He was satisfied that the work had been done in such a clever manner that I would not be able to discover any clew to the men who did the job, and so he got out."

"You are completely baffled, then?" the lawyer remarked, in a tone of disappointment.

"I must admit that I am—for the present," the man-hunter remarked, in his easy, drawling way. "But that is the game, you know. This is a difficult case, and it is going to take time to work it up. If professional criminals were such botches as to do their work so carelessly that the detectives could get on their tracks the moment they began the chase, the fellows would soon have to give up the business."

"That is very true," Foxcroft admitted. "I presume I am a little impatient about the matter and expect too much."

"You cannot hurry a case of this kind along; you must allow matters to develop themselves," the detective observed. The fellow who committed this is evidently an A No. 1 man; a cracksmen who is away up at the top of the ladder in his business, and it is not an easy matter to catch such a fellow, for he is fully as smart as I am, possibly smarter. The only chances I have is that the man may make a blunder, or that some of his pals, who are notas keen as the head devil of the gang, will make a false move, and then there is the chapter of accidents, and on that I depend more than on anything else."

"Yes, I understand. In the long run Providence is more apt to favor the innocent than the guilty."

"That is about it. I am not a particularly religious man, but my observations certainly indicate that rascals do not prosper. In the end the evil-doer is bound to come to grief."

"Yes, I think you are right; such has been my experience."

"Well, I do not think I can do anything more here," the detective observed. "This job was done by a professional—a professional would be a stranger in the town, and so I have been looking after the strangers. There are only a few in the place, boarders mostly, who did not return to the city when the regular September hegira took place, and I was not able to discover anything suspicious about any of them, with the exception of two men, who said they were farmers, and were talking with old man Bindley about buying his farm on the North Road—the farmer who died on the night of the murder."

"Yes, I know; I was in the house at the time of the old man's death. He sent for me to come up that night on important business, but when I arrived, I found that the old man had had a 'stroke,' as the country people term it, and was hovering between life and death. He was unconscious and not able to speak from the time of the shock until his death."

"The business he wanted to discuss with you was in regard to the sale of his farm?"

"So his family supposed, but as the old man was a peculiar customer, a man who believed in keeping his business entirely to himself, his family knew but little about the matter. They suspected, though, from the fact that there had been two strangers there looking at the farm, that there was a sale in prospect, and that I had been summoned to draw out the papers."

"Yes, I learned all those particulars, and as I could not find out anything about these two supposed farmers, I came to the conclusion that there was something wrong about them."

"I noticed that the family did not seem to know anything about them. They said two strangers had been talking with Pap, and they suppose it was about the farm," Foxcroft said.

"That family are the dullest set of dumb-heads that I think I ever struck!" the detective exclaimed, in disgust. "I tried my best to get a description of the two men, and I'm blest if every one of them didn't give a different account; then I hunted all through the neighborhood to see if I couldn't get on their track, but it was no go. The men came by train from somewhere, and I went to all the villages for thirty miles, but only had my labor for my pains!"

"That was strange!" the lawyer exclaimed, profoundly impressed with the patience and perseverance of this human bloodhound.

"The two fellows were crooked—no doubt about that, or they would not have taken so much pains to cover up their tracks!" the detective asserted.

"Certainly, that seems to be the truth!"

"Yes, they paid three visits to the farm in a week, and they must have found shelter some-

where near at hand during that time, and if they had not been up to some crooked work they would not have been so careful to keep themselves in the background."

"What game do you think they were up to?" Foxcroft asked, his curiosity excited.

"I think it was the old bunco business; the pair seemed to be working on that line, and old man Bindley, from what I hear of him, I should judge would be just the fellow that a couple of sharp bunco-men would pick out to operate upon."

"The old man was well-off and extremely sharp at a bargain."

"Yes, one of the grasping kind of countrymen that are just pie to the cunning bunco-workers. They fool the man with the idea that he has caught a couple of city suckers, and the first thing he knows he is 'touched' for his 'wad,' and the trick is worked so quickly that the men are off with the money before the victim has time to collect his senses. In nine cases out of ten, the bunco victim is either an idiot or a rascal."

"You are about right there, I think."

"Oh, yes; well, now that I have got these two strangers figured up as bunco-men, it does not help me any."

"No?"

"Not by a jugful, for a job of this kind would be entirely out of their line. These regular professional crooks are divided into different classes; the bunco-man doesn't pick pockets, the pickpocket is not a housebreaker, and the cracksman would never think of attempting to play a confidence game. Of course, once in a while a man will come up who is extra smart and able to work two or three branches as well as one, but he is the exception to the rule."

"Yes, I see."

"But the bunco-men may have been pals of the man who did the murder, and, acting on that theory, I took a run up to New York to see what I could do there, when I made the discovery that I had come to the end of my rope here, and in New York I learned of a man who was noted for doing just such jobs as this one that was worked here—a man who among the crooks was known as The Strangler."

CHAPTER XV.

THE STORY OF THE STRANGLER.

"AHA!" exclaimed the lawyer, deeply interested; "it seems to me that you have made considerable progress in this affair despite your modest assertion that you had not been able to do anything."

"Just wait until I get through, and you may change your mind about that," the detective replied, with a quiet smile.

"The Strangler!" Foxcroft remarked, in a reflective way. "By Jove! that is a startling kind of a name to bestow on a man."

"There are few of these professional criminals who do not have some peculiar alias of this kind, the name derived either from some personal attribute, such as Black Jack, Red Mike, Bandy-legged Billy, or from the occupation they formerly followed, Shoemaker John, Jake the Tailor, or from the way in which they do the crooked work to which they devote their time, like Slippery Sam, a noted pickpocket, who, when he was unfortunate enough to be caught while at work, had a trick of slipping out of his coat, leaving his would-be captor to hold on to the garment while he took to his heels."

"A cunning rogue!"

"Yes, he was a terror!" the detective declared. "Now, Mr. Foxcroft, as I know that you are a man who can be trusted, I am going to let you into a little bit of detective strategy that is not generally known."

"I shall feel highly complimented!" the lawyer declared. "And the knowledge may come useful to me in my profession, for here in the country the lines are not drawn as strictly as in the city, where you have your criminal lawyers who confine themselves mostly to criminal cases, and your civil lawyers who cannot be hired to go into a criminal court, but a man like myself takes anything that comes along, that is, in reason."

"Yes, I understand. Well, we city detectives have a class of people who might be termed 'stool-pigeons,' who act as a sort of go-between from the detectives to the crooks. For instance, say we get a man dead to rights, his crime don't amount to much, but if the case was pushed against him, he would stand a good chance of going up the river."

"We know that the man is a little weak-kneed—know, too, that he has a large acquaintance among the crooks, and is looked upon as being a square man by them."

"The screws are put on him; we say, 'You are surely booked for Sing Sing if we are a mind to push this case, but if we hold back certain evidence, pigeon-hole the indictment, in fact, you can get out. If we do this what will you do for us?'"

"A powerful pressure!" Foxcroft exclaimed.

"You bet! and if the man is inclined to be a squealer, he weakens and says that he will do anything that is required of him."

"Then it is given out to the public that we had no case against the man, and he goes free,

but from that time forth that fellow is in the pay of the police."

"Yes, yes, I see."

"There are probably fifty men in New York who are known to be on the 'cross,' and are implicitly trusted by the crooks, who can be depended upon to communicate immediately with the authorities the moment an executed or contemplated crime comes to their knowledge, knowing that they will be well paid for the information. It is a sort of spy system that produces most important results sometimes."

"Say there has been a big bank robbery and the crooks have managed to get away with their plunder without leaving any traces."

"We send for our men, who are known to be on intimate terms with crooks who do the bank act—the different classes of criminals have saloons which answer for houses of call to them, and where they are sure to be found at some time of the day when in town. We ask, 'Have you noticed any of the bank crooks putting their heads together lately—who of the big guns are in town? How are they fixed for money?' If he is not able to give any satisfactory information, he is dismissed with the warning to keep his eyes open. Then if he sees some of the crooks with a big boodle, or if some men who were loafing about the town have suddenly disappeared he reports to us, and we have a clew to go on."

"And I suppose in a great many cases the criminals are thus betrayed by a pal in whom they place the utmost confidence," the lawyer observed.

"Yes, and if it wasn't for these spies we detectives would have a mighty hard time in nailing our birds."

"Well, that is one little detective secret, and here is another. We men, who have studied the crooks and their ways, know that all the prominent criminals have their own peculiar manner of operating in the particular branch of business which they pursue, so that when we become familiar with a man's peculiarities in this respect, we are able sometimes after a job is done to give a shrewd guess from the way the trick was performed as to who the crook was that put up the work."

"It is really a science!" Foxcroft declared, in admiration.

"Yes, we have got it down pretty fine," the detective admitted, indulging in his quiet little laugh.

"Well, the moment I took hold of this job, I ran over in my mind the names of the crooks who would be apt to do a trick of this kind, and tried to remember if any one of the men was ever in the habit of doing work in this fashion," the detective continued.

"I judge that you did not succeed."

"No, I was all at sea. The fact is this chloroform business is rather out of date in this country now, although it had quite a run some years ago. There are fashions in crime that ebb and flow, the same as in everything else, you know."

The lawyer nodded assent.

"Well, I couldn't fix on my man, so I ran up to New York, laid the matter before the chief, and asked to have the stool-pigeons summoned."

"They came and I interviewed them one by one, but all to no purpose—none knew any man who would be apt to do the chloroform act."

"Then the chief bethought him of a new man whom he had, locked up at Headquarters, an Englishman who had just been caught, and who was ready to give up everything and everybody to get out of the hole."

"You might interview him," the chief suggested. "Although he is so new to the country it is hardly probable that he will be able to give you any information, still, sometimes a man can pick up a point in a quarter where he least expects it."

"That is very true indeed," the lawyer observed. "Your chief is a man of great discernment."

"Yes, the man who looks after the police business of a big city like New York has got to be away up at the top of the heap, or else he will not be able to keep up with the procession!" the detective declared.

"Well, I interviewed my gentleman. He was an English sneak-thief, who also did a little in the pickpocket line when the opportunity offered. He had only been in the country a week, and was unlucky enough to get 'pinched' the very first time he attempted to take a trick. He had come the old dodge of ringing the bell, sending an urgent message to the mistress of the house that he wanted to see her on particular business, and then, when the girl departed, cleaned out the hall-stand. As it happened though, when he slipped through the door with a fifty-dollar overcoat he met the gentleman of the house, who immediately tumbled to what was up. The fellow dropped the coat and ran for dear life; pursuit was given and, after a long chase, he was caught. He tried to get out of it by protesting that he was not the man—he was an innocent passer-by who, hearing the hue and cry, had joined in to help catch the fugitive—had chased him through a tenement-house into the yard, where the man had scaled a fence into another yard, and as he was preparing to follow, the rest came up and seized him."

"An ingenious plea!"

"Yes, and as the night was a dark one, the man who had caught him with the overcoat was a little doubtful about his identity, or he professed to be, after thinking the matter over, although he was willing enough to declare that the fellow was the thief when he was first caught. The truth of the matter was, the man had got back his property, and that was all he cared about: he did not want to be put to the trouble of coming to court to prosecute the fellow. Of course, we did not allow our man to know that there was a chance for him to get out of the scrape, when the proposal was made to go light on him if he would act as a police spy."

"Yes, I see."

"I know that it doesn't look exactly right to allow a man to go free that you know to be a regular professional criminal, but sometimes it is necessary to fight fire with fire."

"True, and there is nothing like setting a rogue to catch a rogue."

"That is correct. Well, I told this man the story of the murder. 'If I was in Hengland now I could tell you where to put your fingers on the man right away!' he declared. 'For there is a cove there who does his work in just such a fashion, and by so doing he has got the name of the Strangler. He is a kind of a mystery, this chap, for he is a swell cove, comes of a family of nobs, they say, a high-flyer who is on the turf and up to all sorts of big games, but when he gets down on his luck he goes in for the chloroform act, and the way he works the trick is: he picks out a sleeping bloke, puts the "wiper," or the sponge with the chloroform on it to the nose, plants his knee on the chest and grabs the pigeon by the throat until the chloroform gets in its work; then he goes for the valuables."

"And from all appearances it seems as if that was exactly the way this murder was perpetrated," the lawyer remarked.

"Yes, but the Strangler is not on this side of the water. I questioned the man on that point."

"Might he not have come to this country without the knowledge of the party?" the shrewd Mr. Foxcroft asked.

"I thought of that, but the fellow did not think that he had, although he admitted that he had not heard anything of the Strangler for a month or two, and it was possible that he had crossed the ocean."

"I believe that you have secured a clew to the right man!" the other declared, in a tone of conviction.

"Do you really think so?" the detective asked, in a non-committal way.

"Yes, I do."

"But supposing that the Strangler is in this country, how would he be apt to find his way down to this remote country town?"

"Because he was acquainted with this Miss Allison across the water. You remember her story: she fled from England to this country; this Strangler was an old acquaintance, and, in some way, found out where she was, and came to the neighborhood. Being an old acquaintance, he knew her story—understood the value of the papers which were in the mahogany box, and to secure them committed the crime, and now I begin to have an opinion that those documents are much more valuable than I at first supposed. It may be possible that Miss Allison, who has been absent from England for fifteen or sixteen years, as near as I can judge, was not well-posted—did not really know the value of the papers, or that she preferred not to trust me with the full importance of the secret."

"You have arrived at exactly the same conclusion as myself," the detective remarked with a smile. "I did not let on about my conclusions, for I wanted to see how you would work it out."

"Of course it is my business as a lawyer to put two and two together."

"It may be possible that we are on a false scent, but I do not think so. This Strangler is represented as being one of the nobs, a high-toby cracksman who does not follow his trade except when he is actually obliged to from all other resources failing," the detective remarked.

"And from that circumstance I should fancy he would be a remarkably difficult man to trap."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that. It is more difficult to catch a man of brains of this kind than to put the collar on a dozen common rascals, but I like to get on a job of this sort once in a while, for it rather spurs a man up—puts him on his mettle, and gives him a chance to show what kind of stuff he is made of, you see."

"Yes, I understand; you feel that you are measuring strength with a foeman who is worthy of your steel."

"Exactly! that is the idea. Well, my work here is ended, and the quicker I get back to town to enter upon my search for The Strangler, the better."

"Yes, I should say so; but do you think he will be apt to remain in New York?" Foxcroft asked, as if he was a little doubtful.

"Oh, yes, the chances are big that he will. There is no place in the world where a rogue

can hide equal to a big metropolis," the detective answered.

"That certainly is the truth."

"And then the girl will be in New York, too, and you can depend upon it that, sooner or later, this man will open communication with her."

"Yes, yes, and if you set a watch upon her, you will be apt to get at him."

"The watch is already set," the other replied. "Two of the best 'shadows' in New York have been detailed for that business, and from the time that Miss Irma steps foot in the city, she will be watched day and night."

"You have not allowed the grass to grow under your feet."

"The man who don't keep on moving will get left," the other replied. "If I could have got a description of The Strangler, it would have helped me, but the Englishman either couldn't, or wouldn't, give one."

"Well, that is all there is to say, and as we are near the hotel, I will get out. I leave for New York in the morning, and will write to you from there."

And this terminated the interview.

CHAPTER XVI.

SOAP'S PUZZLE.

SOAP MACKENZIE was too old a stager to be easily astonished, but the sight of the girl who bore such a striking resemblance to the country maiden affected him powerfully.

"I have heerd tell of sick things, and read about them," he muttered, as he stood staring at the portal through which the two ladies had disappeared, "but I will be hanged if I ever run across anything of this kind before!"

"Talk about two people being as alike as two peas, why, this 'ere gal is the very dead image of t'other one!"

"I think the governor would like to know about this thing," he muttered, scratching his head, slowly, as though that process aided his reflecting powers. "He has got a big head on his shoulders, and mebbe he could make something out of it."

Then Soap hunted through his pockets until he found the stub of a lead-pencil; another search brought to light a dirty business-card; then he approached the door and put down the number of the house on the card.

"I reckon that they live here sure enough," he remarked, "for they had a key and went right in without ringing; and if they had been only visitors, making a call, they would not have done that, but I will be dashed if this 'ere thing don't astonish me more than any bit of business that I have struck for a long time."

Then the man proceeded on his way down the avenue, and as he went on he wrestled with the subject in his mind.

"Blamed if I don't feel as if I ought to let the captain know about this 'ere thing as soon as possible," he muttered, after reflecting upon the matter for awhile.

"I don't know whether I will be able to find him or not, but I kin try."

Acting upon the impulse, he hailed a passing car, boarded it, and was carried downtown.

Quitting the car at the Brooklyn bridge, he crossed by the cars to New York, and took the Elevated road for up-town.

Getting off at Twenty-eighth street, he went through to Fourth avenue, and entered a house near Twenty-seventh street; up-stairs he went to the second story, where, by means of a key which he drew from his pocket, he entered a small front room.

This house was next door to the one to which the affable Mr. Gallagher had taken the dissipated clerk, and the room into which Soap Mackenzie entered was only separated by a wall from the apartment where Dick Beamish lay, extended at full length upon a sofa, sleeping off the effects of the liquor which he had drank so freely.

The window curtains were up, and the light from the street enabled Soap to see what he was about.

The first thing he did was to light the gas and then pull down the curtains.

The apartment was plainly furnished, and was apparently used as an office, although there was a large wardrobe in one corner of the room which looked very much as though a pull would transform it into a bed.

In the rear wall was a door, and on this door Soap Mackenzie knocked in a peculiar manner.

In a moment or two the door was unlocked from the inside, opened, and Paddlewick appeared.

"Hello, Soap, what brings you here?" the gentleman inquired, anticipating from the man's manner that he had come on an errand of importance.

"Well, governor, I ran across the strangest thing to-night that I have struck in a dog's age!" the fellow declared.

"Sit down and explain," Paddlewick remarked, taking a chair as he spoke.

Mackenzie took a seat, and then told his story.

Paddlewick listened attentively.

"It is odd" he commented, when Soap finished.

"You had better believe it is!" the tough declared.

"Are you quite sure that you have not made any mistake about the matter?"

"Oh, no; I got the thing down dead to rights!"

"And you had a good view of the girl's face?"

"You bet! Why, governor, I was almost as near to her as I am to you!"

"Of course you are so well acquainted with her that you ought not to make any mistake about the matter."

"I haven't. You kin bet all you are worth on that!" Soap Mackenzie declared, in the most positive way.

"Well, I suppose it is one of those strange resemblances which sometimes occur, but at present I do not see that I can turn it to any account," Paddlewick remarked, in a thoughtful way.

"Of course I didn't know how that would be, but I thought you ought to know about the matter."

"Yes, yes, you were quite right to make a report as soon as possible."

"Say, governor, 'tain't possible that 'ere gal that I saw is the one that went off with the Tinker to-night?" Soap asked, abruptly, evidently very doubtful in his mind in regard to the matter.

"Oh, no; how could that be possible?" Paddlewick exclaimed.

"Well, I don't know, governor, how it could be," the other observed. "That gal is over in Jersey City, safe in the cage that we provided for her, 'cos she went along with the Tinker as nice as you please."

"Oh, yes, everything is all right in that quarter. The trap was a perfect one, and if she had been an old and experienced woman of the world instead of a simple, innocent country girl, she could not have helped falling into the snare. You have been deceived by a strange resemblance, and that is all there is to the matter."

"Hang me if it don't beat my time, though!" the other declared. "I wish, governor, that you could have seen this gal! She had on different clothes to what she wore, but I would have sworn that it was the same gal."

"The resemblance must, indeed, have been a strong one to deceive such an old hand as you are," Paddlewick observed. "But it is not possible that it could have been the girl, for if the scheme had miscarried in any way—if the Tinker did not succeed in getting her to go to the house in Jersey City, she would, undoubtedly, have remained in New York, and she could not possibly have got over to Brooklyn."

"Well, it looks that way to me, and I will be hanged if I know what to make of it."

"It is about time for Gallagher to be here with his report as to how matters have gone," Paddlewick remarked, with a glance at his watch.

Hardly had the words left his lips when there was the sound of a key being inserted in the lock of the outer door.

"There he is now!" Soap exclaimed.

The man was right in his conjecture, for when the door opened, the oily Mr. Gallagher appeared.

"Talk of Satan and he appears!" Paddlewick exclaimed.

"Ah! you were conversing about me?" the new-comer remarked, as he closed the door behind him, and then helped himself to a chair.

"Yes, we were saying that it was 'bout time for you to show up," Soap remarked.

"How is everything—all right?" Paddlewick inquired, a trifle anxious, for he thought he detected that there was a cloud on the brow of the new-comer.

"No, sir, not by a blamed sight!" the Tinker exclaimed, in a very emphatic manner, and the others immediately prepared themselves for the worst, for they understood that some dire misfortune had happened to thus startle the plaid Mr. Gallagher.

"Explain!" cried Paddlewick.

And then the Tinker told the story of the collision.

"The rush of the crowd separated me from the girl," he said in conclusion. "And I was not able to find her again, although I hunted all over the boat while we were running in for the Jersey shore, for it was the supposition that the boat would sink in a very few minutes, and the pilot's idea was to get as close to the shore as possible; the damage though was not anywhere near as bad as everybody thought, and we got into the slip, and made fast, all right; then I watched the passengers as they came off, but couldn't find the girl. There were a dozen or so of people forced overboard by the rush when the collision occurred, and it was my idea that the girl went overboard, but the Annex Boat picked them all up, so it was supposed, and landed them at the ferry slip; so as the girl was not on board of her I came to the conclusion that she must have been missed in the darkness and was, probably, drowned."

"I did not kick up any row about the matter, you know, for I was not certain how you would want me to act."

"I got a boat and went out on the river as soon as I found that she was not on board of the Annex Boat, thinking she might be floating around somewhere, for one of the deck-hands had sense to throw over some life-preservers when the people were forced into the water, but I was not able to find her and so came to the conclusion she was a goner."

Paddlewick and Mackenzie had listened attentively to the recital, and at its close the tough could hold in no longer, exclaiming:

"Governor, I will bet four dollars to a Florida orange that this 'ere gal that I saw in Brooklyn to-night is our gal and no mistake!"

The Tinker looked amazed at this outbreak, and Paddlewick hastened to explain matters.

After the tale was told, Gallagher was more astonished than before.

"Maybe it is so—maybe you have struck the girl," he remarked, evidently doubtful. "But if it is a fact, blame me! if it don't beat anything that I ever heard of in all my life, and I am no chicken either!"

"It certainly is a very strange affair," Paddlewick observed. "I arranged the plan to capture the girl in such a skillful way that it did not seem possible that it could fail."

"It would not have slipped up had it not been for this accident to the boat, and nobody could foresee, or calculate, upon a thing of that kind!" Gallagher declared.

"A churchman would be certain that the hand of Heaven was in it," Paddlewick remarked in a sarcastic way. "Since I had planned so well that man could not rescue the girl, Heaven took a hand in the game."

"Oh, it was an accident!" Gallagher declared.

"Of course, no doubt 'bout that!" Soap exclaimed.

"Yes, an accident, which I could neither foresee nor prevent, snatched her out of my hands, and now, by another accident, Mackenzie here stumbled upon the girl in Brooklyn."

"You don't think that there is any doubt about the matter?" the Tinker asked.

"Not a bit of it!" Soap declared in the most positive way. "I am just as sure that it is the very identical gal as that I am a-sitting here this minute!"

"But how on earth did she get over there?" Gallagher asked, exceedingly puzzled by the problem.

"The explanation is simple enough," Paddlewick replied. "She was probably rescued by some passing craft which was bound for Brooklyn. She told her story, and as she was a stranger in the city, some one on board of the boat offered her shelter until she could communicate with her friends."

"That is it!" Soap exclaimed. "You kin bet yer life that the governor has got the thing down fine!"

"What is to be done?" Gallagher asked.

"Well, we must go to work to get hold of the girl again, and that will require some thought," Paddlewick remarked. "Her first move in the morning will undoubtedly be to open communication with Mr. Beamish. Of course, having no suspicion that all is not right, and that you did not come from him, she will tell how you met her and became separated by the accident."

"And then all the fat will be in the fire," the Tinker observed. "It will come out that young Beamish was not the man who met her, and a suspicion that something was wrong will be at once aroused."

"We must provide against that, and do our best to turn this matter to our advantage," the master-plotter replied. "We must contrive to arrange the affair so that no blame will be attached to young Beamish, for he will be likely to be useful to us in the future, and we must manage matters so that his employers will not have any suspicion of the truth."

"But can it be done?" Gallagher asked, evidently doubtful.

"I think so. Beamish is in the other room, sleeping off the effects of the liquor?" Paddlewick asked.

"Yes, and I locked the door so he could not get out if he awoke before I came," the Tinker replied.

"A wise precaution. Well, he ought to come to his senses pretty soon, and if he does not, you must rouse him. Then you must say that, finding he was determined upon going to sleep, you went to meet the girl so as to keep him from getting into any trouble, but as you did not know where she was to be taken in the city, you started with her to Jersey to your sister's. Then tell about the accident, but insist that she was saved by a passing craft, but where she was taken you knew not."

"Yes, yes, that will do," Gallagher observed.

"Now, then, in order to explain how it was that he did not go to meet the girl, he must say he was taken sick and deputed you, an old friend whom he could trust, but on the way you lost the address of the boarding-house, and so took her to Jersey to your sister's."

"Oh, that is a lovely ghost-story and will be sure to catch 'em!" Soap declared.

"Yes, that will work without any trouble," Gallagher observed. "That will make his record clear, and it will give him an excuse,

too, for not kicking up any row about the matter, for he can say that I did not notify him about the accident until the morning, and by that time he will be all right."

"Yes, he may be useful to us in the future," Paddlewick observed. "The first thing in the morning, you, Soap, must take up this Brooklyn matter."

"All right!" the tough exclaimed.

"Find out all about the girl, and shadow her if she leaves the house, so I will have timely notice of what she intends to do. Although, thanks to this accident, the first scheme failed, I shall finally succeed. Lightning don't strike twice in the same place."

And this ended the conference.

CHAPTER XVII.

IRMA'S RESOLVE.

WE must now return to the two girls and relate a conversation between the two which took place after their return home from sending the telegram and posting the letter.

The pair nestled down in cozy chairs while the old lady read the evening newspaper.

"Well, Irma, have you really made up your mind to go on the stage?" the young actress asked.

"Yes, if I can succeed in getting an engagement."

"Well, I don't think there will be much trouble about that, if I put in a good word for you. Come to the piano and let me hear you sing."

Irma complied, and sung while Ernestine played.

"You have a good voice and know how to use it pretty well. You must have studied under a good master," the actress remarked.

"Yes, he was considered to be an excellent one. He was a native of Oldharbor, but taught music in the city for years, Professor Daughton."

"Oh, yes, I have met the professor, and a nice old gentleman he is, too; a regular musical genius, if ever there was one in this world! I don't wonder that your method is good now that I know who your master was," the actress declared. "You need practice—stage practice, of course, for singing in the parlor and on the boards are two very different matters. You will have to acquire considerable more get up and get, so to speak—more dash and brilliancy, you know; but that will all come in time; there is no royal road to acting—nothing that can take the place of experience. You can study for the stage for ten years, and then, after you get on, you will make the discovery that you have learnt more in the first month than has been taught you in all the time that you have studied."

"Yes, I suppose so. We had a lady come to Oldharbor who was a teacher of elocution, and she volunteered to take part in one of our performances; in fact, to use the common word, she 'bossed' the entire entertainment, and made a most ridiculous failure, for when she got on the stage she was a regular laughing stock."

"Oh, there is any number of so-called teachers who are frauds of the first water; none of us regular professionals take any stock in them at all. But you will do all right. I shall not be afraid to recommend you strongly, and there is little doubt I can get you the position, and then going in the same company with me will smooth the road for you."

"Oh, yes, you are so kind to aid me an utter stranger!" Irma exclaimed, and the grateful tears rose in her eyes.

"There, don't you cry, you little goose!" the young actress exclaimed, drawing the head of the other to her breast and kissing away her tears. "I have taken a fancy to you, of course. I did that the moment your head bobbed up on the other side of the log, and I am not a girl either much given to gush over any one, particularly strangers, but, some way, the peril that we encountered, side by side, seemed to draw me to you, and I really feel as if, instead of being new acquaintances, we had known each other for years."

"Yes, it is strange, but I fell that way, too, toward you," Irma remarked, returning the caresses of the other. "I have never had a girl friend—plenty of acquaintances, of course, but none that I felt I could trust."

"We will get along nicely together, I know," the young actress declared. "You must look upon me as a big sister, able and willing to fight your battles for you. But I say, what will this lawyer friend of yours say to your going on the stage?" Ernestine asked, abruptly.

"Oh, he will not care," Irma replied, feeling conscious that she seemed a little confused under the sharp gaze of the young actress. "I spoke about the matter before I came to the city. I said I would like to go on the stage, and he replied that it was his opinion that I had talent suitable for such a vocation, but presumed that it would not be an easy matter to get a chance."

"He has seen you act, then?"

"I presume so from that, although I am not certain of the fact, but our club gave two performances in his town for the benefit of the firemen, and it is probable that he attended."

"I say, Irma, is there a little bit of a possibil-

ity that this gentleman is a trifle in love with you?"

A slight blush came on the pale face of the country girl.

"Oh, no, he is only good to me because my situation excites his sympathies. He is very rich, and then, is almost old enough to be my father."

"These middle-aged wooers are a great deal worse than the young men, sometimes," Ernestine observed, with a knowing shake of the head. "But whether he is in love with you or not, he most certainly has shown that he is a true friend."

"Yes, and about the only one I have in the world with the exception of yourself."

"Let me see, now," the young actress remarked, with a wise air. "We must come down to business. I suppose you will have to call upon this gentleman, whose representative met you, but you cannot do so until you learn his address from your lawyer friend. Still, I don't know as you need to bother yourself to call. If there is an account of the accident in the papers to-morrow and your name is given as having been lost, you can write to the *Journal* and state that you are still in the land of the living—give your address, then the party can call on you."

"Yes, of course, as I am a total stranger to them, it is not possible that they can take any particular interest in my fate."

"Then I will take you to see my manager in the morning, and I don't doubt I can secure you a position."

"Yes, I hope so!" Irma exclaimed with clasped hands, as though she was indulging in silent prayer. "I would be willing to go for just enough to pay my expenses so as to be with you."

"Oh, you can do better than that. The laborer is worthy of his hire, you know, and a girl like yourself, with a good strong voice, and a little stage experience, is surely worth five or six dollars a week," the young actress declared.

"I should be delighted indeed if I could secure such a chance."

"Well, as I said before, 'kissing goes by favor,' and in a case of this kind the advantage of having a friend at court can hardly be overrated. A good word from me will do more to secure you the engagement than a bushel of recommendations from people that this particular manager only knows by reputation."

"Oh, yes, I understand how that can be. Being a regular professional yourself, and holding a good position, you are qualified to judge whether an applicant is likely to suit or not."

"Yes, I can make a pretty good guess of it. And then too I am so situated just now that whatever I say will have great weight; you see this party starts under rather peculiar circumstances. The troupe is called the 'New York, All-Star, Comic Opera Company.'"

"Quite a title," Irma observed, with a smile.

"Yes, the manager has got the circus idea in his head that the longer the title the more attractive it will be," the other observed. "This manager, by the way, is something of a curiosity. Although a comparatively young man, yet he is an old manager; in fact, one might say with truth that he has been in the theatrical business all his life, for he began as a boy in the box-office. He has two older brothers, both managers—successful ones, who have made fortunes, and control great attractions. My man, though, has never been very successful; his career has been up and down, with more downs than ups; then he never has had any capital to speak of, and money is the sinews of war in the theatrical business as in all others."

"Yes, I should imagine so."

"His name is Josephs, Samuel Josephs, and as you can guess from the name, he is a descendant of the 'chosen people,' a Hebrew; a soft-spoken gentleman with such an insinuating manner that his popular name among his acquaintances is Soapy Sam."

"What an odd name!"

"My dear, it fits him like a glove," Ernestine declared. "It is said that when he is on a tour, and business is bad, he can take less money and pay more bills with it than any other man in the business."

"He must be skillful as a financier."

"Oh, yes, he has a great genius for 'standing off' and 'hanging up' creditors, to use the slang of the day. Now, then, I suppose the extremely natural question comes up in your mind—why do I go with a man who bears such a doubtful reputation?"

"Yes, I should think you would be afraid that he would not pay you," Irma observed.

"Well, now, it is in order to explain one peculiar trait about Soapy Sam. He is thoroughly honest in one respect. Just so long as he has money, supposing that he has some when he starts out on the road, or sufficient money comes in at the door to pay expenses, then everybody can depend upon receiving every cent that is due, but if he hasn't any money, or business is so poor that he does not take enough to pay, then, to use his own expressive language, the people must 'hop short.' He is very frank about the matter, and makes no bones of telling you just what to expect."

"Well, but isn't it rather imprudent to engage with such a man?" Irma asked.

"Under ordinary circumstances it might be, but in the present case Samuel has found an 'angel'—in theatrical parlance, dear, an angel is the party who finds the money. Samuel has managed to discover a gentleman, a retired business man, who, allured by the fabulous accounts that the newspaper people give of the profits of the show business, is desirous of trying his luck in that line. He has the money, Soapy Sam the experience; before the season ends the chances are that the angel will have the experience and Soapy Sam the money; the same old joke over again."

"Yes, I understand."

"Samuel talks largely about the man having twenty thousand dollars and being willing to stay on until the money is gone, but that is all nonsense! The theatrical angel goes into the business to make money, not to lose it. He will put up a certain amount to get the show on the road very willingly, indeed, but after it gets started, ninety-nine out of a hundred will become extremely disgusted if they are required to put out more money. In this case the wily Samuel has succeeded in getting his man to advance two thousand dollars. I saw the money paid, or I would not have believed it, and before I agreed to go I made Soapy Sam put six hundred dollars in the bank subject to my order at the rate of fifty dollars per week; that is twelve weeks' salary for me, and I am to have that sum whether we run twelve weeks or not; my salary is fifty dollars a week and my expenses, so you see, I am all right, and if you go you can depend upon my looking out for you."

Irma thanked the young actress for her friendly interest, and then, after a little more conversation of no particular importance, all retired to rest, Ernestine sharing her couch with her new-made friend.

The pair slept as sleep those free from the weight of cankered care, but in about three hours were awakened by a fearful racket.

The house was on fire!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SPY IS BAFFLED.

BRIGHT and early on the morning which followed the night during which the consultation had taken place between the conspirators, plotting against the peace and happiness of the orphan girl, Soap Mackenzie crossed the bridge to Brooklyn and then proceeded to the house on Flatbush avenue which the girl who bore such a striking resemblance to Irma Allison had entered.

In the mind of Soap there was not the slightest doubt that he had seen the country girl.

"It is all werry well for the governor to talk in his learned way about it's being a resemblance and how such things often happen," he muttered, as he proceeded to his destination in the car. "But I know better. It was the gal herself, and there isn't any mistake about it."

"How she managed to git here after the accident on the river is a puzzle which is a leetle too deep for me, and I ain't a-going to bother my head about it."

"I know that it is the gal, and inside of a mighty few minutes I will know all about it, and you kin bet yer sweet life on it, too!"

But there is an old saying in regard to the "best laid plans of mice and men" not turning out exactly as they ought to do, and in this case there was a surprise in store for Soap Mackenzie which he little expected.

When he came within a block of his destination he went outside on the car-platform.

A crowd ahead attracted his attention.

"Hello! what is up?" he exclaimed, to the driver.

"Big fire last night—or, rather, early this morning," that worthy replied.

"Is that so?"

"Yes; a couple of houses cleaned out. There was a liquor store underneath one on 'em, and the fire, which started there, got under such headway before the engines got to work that the firemen had all they could do to save the rest of the block."

A sudden suspicion came into the mind of the spy.

"Thunder and lightning!" he muttered, under his breath, "this would be a bad streak of luck if one of these houses should happen to be the place that I am arter."

The suspicion soon became a certainty, for when the spot was reached where the fire had wrought destruction, Mackenzie saw that one of the houses which had been burnt was the abode which the country girl had entered.

"Blame the luck!" the fellow growled, as he jumped off the car and joined the crowd of loungers who were staring at the ruins.

The spy took a careful look around so as to be certain that he had not made any mistake about the matter.

"It is the house, for sure, and all the fat is in the fire," he declared.

He meditated over the situation for a few minutes.

"Blame the infernal luck!" he growled. "This

is as tough a deal as I've struck for a long time. The only thing to be done is to follow the gal up and see what has become of her."

There was a grocery store on the corner, and one of the clerks stood in the doorway.

To this man Mackenzie spoke.

"Pretty big fire?"

"Yes."

"Anybody hurt?"

"Oh, no, but the people in the upper stories had a narrow shave, for the stairs were all on fire before they got up, but they managed to escape by way of the roof."

"Lemme see!" said Mackenzie, assuming an air of reflection. "It 'pears to me that I knew some of the folks in that house—the first one, but I can't call their name jest at present."

"I don't know anything about them," the clerk replied. "None of the people in either house traded here."

This was a setback, and the angry Soap swore to himself under his breath.

Then he sauntered off and tried the man in the butcher's shop a few doors up the street, but he did not know anything about the matter.

"Mighty hard work to trace anybody living in these flat-houses," the spy muttered as he walked up the street. "The tenants are changing all the time, and as they pay cash for all they get the people in the neighborhood ain't apt to get onto their names."

Then a brilliant idea occurred to Soap.

"No use of my fooling my time away here, a trying to pump these people wot don't know nothing. I will hunt up the agent who has charge of the houses, and he will be able to tell jest who lived in the flats."

"Then I will have to make a guess at it, too, for there are four flats in the house—four families, and it will bother me to tell jest which one on 'em was giving shelter to the gal. But it is all I kin do."

Acting on this idea Soap inquired in regard to the agent of the property, and was pleased to learn that his office was only a couple of blocks up the avenue.

He proceeded to the office and found a youth in charge who was disposed to be extremely "fresh" and disagreeable, but Soap was too old a stager not to understand how to handle the young man.

He put on an air of extreme deference and spoke as though he considered the "cheeky" boy to be a person of great importance.

The tale he told was that he saw a young lady that he used to go to school with down in the country, go into the house on the previous evening; he was anxious to renew the acquaintance, but he couldn't for the life of him remember her name.

The youth took the visitor to be some country bumpkin, and as his vanity was flattered by his manner, he graciously condescended to examine the books.

"Now, if this house was like some of 'em that we have got on our books where I have to run a dozen times to get the rent of the tenants, I could tell you something about the people, but these folks were all prompt payers, and either came to the office with their money, or else had it ready when I went for it, so I don't know much about them."

Now, as it happened, Mackenzie had not taken any particular notice of the country girl's companion, and the best description he could give was that she was a tall girl with dark hair.

He did not attempt to describe Irma, for he knew the young man would not know anything about her.

"I guess that must be one of the Miss Gardners who lived in the first flat; there were three of them, all pretty tall girls with dark hair; the second flat was the Joneses, an old couple; third flat Mrs. Herbert; she is an old woman, too, a widow, I guess; don't know anything about her family, for she has only been in the house a week, and we don't bother our heads much with putting questions to the folks who hired. We don't want too many children, and that is all we look after."

"How about the top flat?"

"Jackson! It strikes me that there were two young women there; one is Mrs. Jackson and the other is her sister, I believe; they are both tall, I think; but, if I remember correctly, their hair is light."

"Well, it is either Gardener or Jackson that I want then?"

"Yes, they are the only young women in the house that I know of."

"Have you any idea where they have gone?"

"Not a bit. You might try an advertisement in the papers; that might scare 'em up."

"Yes, that is a good idea."

Then Soap withdrew, and returned immediately to New York where to the "governor," he related the ill-success of his mission.

"Upon my word it looks as if fate itself had entered the lists against me in this affair!" Paddlewick exclaimed, in amazement.

"Mighty bad streak of luck and no mistake!"

"We cannot do anything but wait," the other declared. "The girl will undoubtedly communicate with Mr. Beamish as soon as she possibly can, and through the connection which

Gallagher has established with young Beamish, we can learn when she does so."

"You are right, governor. Oh, you have got a head on your shoulders!" Soap exclaimed, in admiration.

"It will answer. Now you must hunt up Gallagher and give him his instructions about Beamish."

Soap declared he would lose no time, and this brought the interview to an end.

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW THEY ESCAPED.

AND now we must relate how the two friends managed to escape from the ravages of the fire-fight.

Ernestine was a light sleeper, and the first alarm roused her from her slumbers.

It was her custom to have a night-lamp burning in the room, so she could see what she was about.

Naturally cool and self-reliant, she did not give way to fright when she understood the nature of the peril which menaced them.

"It is that dreadful liquor store next door, I'll bet a cookey!" she exclaimed, as, after rousing Irma, she called her mother and bade them dress as quickly as possible.

It did not take the three long to array themselves for the street, and then taking what few valuable articles they could carry, they departed; but when they essayed to descend to the street, the smoke came pouring up the stairway in such profusion that it was plain to them they could not hope to go down that way.

"We must go by way of the roof!" Ernestine cried, and then upward the three went, and so managed to escape.

There were a round dozen of houses, all built alike, and it was an easy matter to pass from roof to roof, and then descend to the street at a safe distance from the fire.

A carriage was procured, and Ernestine, after making a bargain in advance with the driver, like the prudent girl that she was, assisted her mother and Irma to enter, and then got in herself.

"Where are you going, dear?" Mrs. Herbert asked.

"Over to Mrs. Morrisey's in Ninth street, where we used to stop before we set up house-keeping for ourselves," the young actress replied.

"Yes, yes, we will be comfortable there," the old lady remarked.

"It is a sort of professional boarding-house," Ernestine explained to Irma. "Mrs. Morrisey is a very nice woman, and the most of her boarders are professional people, so that an actress can feel at home there, and she will not be stared at as though she was some freak escaped from a dime museum. That is one of the disagreeable things that professional people must expect to encounter if they go to a regular boarding-house."

"Yes, I should imagine that it would not be pleasant."

"It is not—it is very disagreeable; a hotel is bad enough, but in a hotel people, as a rule, mind their own business, which they are not apt to do in the average boarding-house, as far as my experience goes."

"What a dreadful calamity this fire has been for you—all your pretty things destroyed!" Irma exclaimed.

"Yes, but they are insured, so the loss is not so great as it might be," the young actress replied. "And as it happens, all my wardrobe is safe."

"What a lucky thing it was that you did not take your trunks out of storage as I wanted you to do," the old lady remarked.

"Well now, mother, it was rather strange that I should have a sort of presentiment that the trunks had better stay where they were when we moved into the flat," Ernestine said. "And it is not often either that my ideas run counter to mother's," she added. "But, somehow, I had a feeling that it would be for the best to allow them to stay where they were, and now I am exceedingly glad that I did so."

"By the way, Irma!" she exclaimed, abruptly; "these two accidents, the one occurring immediately after the other, leads me to believe that either you or I must be a Jonah!"

"A what?" Irma asked, in astonishment.

"A Jonah! I suppose I will have to enlighten your simple mind in regard to that, for it is a bit of superstition which the stage has borrowed from the sea. A Jonah is an unlucky man or woman, as the case may be—an unfortunate creature who brings bad luck to any enterprise in which he or she may have a part."

"Oh, Ernestine, how you do run on!" Mrs. Herbert exclaimed.

"You just keep quiet, mother, and see how I will prove it. We were on the ferry-boat together, and that noble craft had to get in the way of a bigger boat, with the result of getting filled full of holes, as a Westerner would say. Then we went in swimming together, and were rescued; I carried you to my home in Brooklyn, and, in the promptest manner possible, a fire breaks out and gives me a chance to swindle the insurance company."

"Oh, you do not really think that I brought

these misfortunes upon you?" Irma exclaimed, a little alarmed.

"No; of course not!" the actress replied, bursting into a fit of laughter. "I am not such a slave to superstition, but that is just the way that people argue in this world. My belief is:

"Our acts our angels are, for good or ill,
Our evil geniuses that walk by us still."

"And that is my platform in a nutshell." The arrival of the carriage at their destination put an end to the conversation.

Arrangements were soon made for the reception of the party, and in another hour the three had again retired to rest.

The rules of Mrs. Morrisey's house were made to accommodate her professional boarders, and breakfast could be had from seven to ten, for people who did not get to bed until after midnight cannot be expected to rise with the lark in the morning.

After breakfast was over Ernestine announced that she would take Irma to see the manager.

"There isn't anything like striking when the iron is hot!" the lively young actress declared. "The company was not full yesterday, for I met Soapy Sam, and he told me so, but he may close up the vacancies to-day, so it is well that we take time by the forelock."

"You know best, of course," Irma replied.

"But I must have one of my trunks from the storage so as to get out something to wear," the actress remarked.

"And my trunk is at the Long Island Depôt," the country girl said. "I never thought to give the check to the gentleman who met me."

"It is well that you did not. I will have yours and mine brought up together."

There was an expressman on the corner, used to theatrical work, and therefore accustomed to getting things in a hurry, so within an hour both trunks were delivered at the house.

"You must put on your best harness," Ernestine declared, "for it is the business of every one who expects to make money out of the public to look as well as they can at all times. Beauty and style are the actress's stock in trade, and there are a great many who cannot boast of many other qualifications for the business."

"Doesn't talent count?" Irma asked, in astonishment.

"Oh, yes, there is no discount on talent, but a pretty, dashy woman will manage to pull through with a deal less talent than an ugly one."

"Yes, the eye must be pleased."

"You bet! never mind my slang! It is a dreadful bad habit, I know, but then, it is so sweetly expressive at times, bet your dear life!"

"Oh, Ernestine, I do wish you would stop!" Mrs. Herbert exclaimed, laughing, though, in spite of herself, at her madcap daughter.

"That is all right, mother, I will, one of these days, when I marry and settle down."

Then the girls departed.

In the street Ernestine explained to Irma where they were going.

"The theatrical business in big cities like New York is done through agents, just the same idea as intelligence-offices where servants are hired," the young actress said. "There are half a dozen agents who have offices, ranging from the man who deals only in big-priced opera-singers and actors and actresses of high degree, down to the lowly individual, of seedy aspect, who provides 'talent'—Heaven save the mark!—for the low variety dives scattered through the country where beer and a stage performance are combined."

"These men have books in which you register your name, the line of business you wish to engage for, and your ideas in regard to the salary question."

"Then, when a manager strikes New York in search of talent he makes a bee-line for one of these agents. He is supposed to look over the books, but in nine cases out of ten he does not do anything of the kind; he merely looks around, inquires who is in town, and half the time meets his people outside of the office, makes the engagement on the street, then sends them in to the agent to get their contracts, and for his invaluable services in this affair, the agent gets one-tenth of the first week's salary."

"But it seems to me that he has very little to do with the matter."

"Yes, that is true; but by a polite fiction he is supposed to do it all. The agents are necessary evils, but once in a while they are of service. Now, it was my agent who arranged the deposit of my money. Josephs was very anxious to sign me for his trip, and applied to my agent to arrange the matter. The colonel—Colonel Jones is my agent's name—is a brisk, outspoken business-man who doesn't believe in any nonsense, and he took no stock in Soapy's angel-talk."

"If you want Herbert—the show business is very democratic, and we are usually called by our surnames—you have got to put the ducats for two months right up in the bank!" he said, "and then I'll talk to you."

"That is what the colonel calls making a 'bluff,' and he did not believe that Josephs would 'call' him, that means respond, dear, but the wily Soapy, for once in his life, had got

a man with money at his back, and he 'saw' the colonel and went one month 'better.' I suppose you manage to make some sense out of my slang?"

"Oh, yes; I am not so green as I might be!" Irma declared, with a laugh.

CHAPTER XX.

A NEGOTIATION.

THE dramatic agent's office was on upper Broadway, in the neighborhood of Madison Square, and by the time the girls finished their conversation they were at the door.

The rooms were up one flight, were nicely fitted up, and the front one was well-filled with young and middle-aged men, all dressed neatly, and looking like gentlemen, who were sitting on the chairs ranged along the wall, or else gathered in little groups, busy in conversation.

They appeared to be a lot of clerks and business-men, and the nature of their conversation would not have been suspected by even a close observer if it was not from a curious habit the great majority of them had of posing—striking attitudes, in fact, as though they expected that somebody was watching them and they wished to make a good impression.

This was purely involuntary on their part, and was no affectation; it came from their stage-training, which requires that when the artist is before the audience he shall always be on his guard as to the expression upon his face, his position and his walk.

Then, too, in their salutations to each other there was an elaborate politeness, a slight touch of pompous dignity which bordered a little on the ridiculous.

The men themselves were not conscious of it, and probably would have been indignant and denied that they were strutting in private life as they were accustomed to strut upon the stage, when dressed in doublet and hose.

In the rear of the main room was a smaller apartment, a regular parlor, and this was for the accommodation of the ladies, and in the rear of this a smaller one still, a private office where the manager and actor could talk in private without danger of interruption.

There were half a dozen ladies in the parlor when the girls entered, and three of them came forward and greeted Miss Herbert in the most affectionate manner; yet these were all professional rivals who, before the footlights, would do their best to outshine her.

The other three immediately put their heads together, and portions of their whispered remarks came distinctly to the ears of the pair.

"That's Ernestine Herbert!"

"They say she gets a hundred a week."

"My! she isn't worth that!"

"She's rather bold-looking, isn't she?"

"That is what catches the audiences."

Ernestine looked at the group, and then burst out laughing, and the three who were clustered around her laughed also.

"Go ahead, ladies! Compliments fly when the quality meet!" the young actress exclaimed.

The others colored up, and one, a little bolder than the rest, took upon herself to apologize.

"Well, really we didn't think you could hear what we said, and I hope you will not be angry."

"What? at your harmless chatter? Bless you! I am a girl myself, and I love to gossip and pull people to pieces as well as the next one, only I am always careful not to speak loud enough to allow the one I am criticizing to hear what I say."

The approach of the agent interrupted the conversation.

Colonel Jones was a brisk-looking gentleman, a little below the medium size, with a remarkably bright pair of eyes; a man who gave the impression that he was chock-full of business.

Upon his approach the ladies retreated to their seats again.

"How do you do, Miss Herbert?" and he shook hands with the young actress in the most cordial manner.

"Oh, I am pretty well. Allow me to present Colonel Jones to you, Miss Allison. This is a particular friend of mine, colonel, and I want you to get her a good engagement."

"Why, certainly, I shall be delighted!" the agent exclaimed, and then he shook hands with the country girl, examining her in a critical way, and Irma immediately understood that he was calculating the advantages she possessed for a stage life.

But Irma was not deficient in self-assurance, and the presence of Ernestine gave her courage to endure the scrutiny.

"What is Miss Allison's line?"

"Comic opera, general business; she has an excellent soprano voice, and is a fair actress, although she is not much more than a novice; you can see for yourself that her appearance is decidedly in her favor," Ernestine answered.

"Oh, yes, that is all right," the colonel coincided.

"You mustn't mind our discussing your points in this open manner, as if you were a horse put up at auction," Ernestine remarked to Irma. "That is the way the business must be done."

"Oh, I do not mind it, I am sure," Irma replied.

"I had an idea that you might get her a chance with Josephs," the young actress observed to the agent. "She would like to go with me if it is possible to arrange it."

"Oh, yes, I think we can settle that all right. There are three more ladies wanted, one for general business, and two in the chorus, but Sammy isn't willing to give much salary. I could have got twenty for him, all good people, too, but they are not going to work for nothing. You see, he has to give you a good salary, and his two comedians come high, so he is trying to cut down on the rest of the party. I really think Soapy is going to make a success of it this time, for he is managing very shrewdly. He has got together a good party at reasonable salaries, and I have managed to secure some first-class dates for him—good theaters, you know, where every show that is worth anything is bound to do business."

"I am very glad to hear it, I am sure," Ernestine declared. "What is the figure for general business?"

"Only five a week and expenses," the colonel replied.

"That is a chorus lady's salary," the actress observed.

"Yes, the same figure for all."

"Well, Miss Allison will go for seven and no less," Ernestine remarked.

"He ought to give it, of course," the colonel declared. "And, although Miss Allison is a stranger to me, yet from her appearance, backed by your recommendation, I should have no hesitation in saying that she should command ten per week, but Sammy is very independent this time, for he has some money at his back, and as his principal people get good salaries, he wants to save on the minor members."

"There he is now!" Ernestine exclaimed.

Through the open double doors the actress could look into the front office, and so had been able to see the manager when he entered the main room.

The colonel immediately called to the newcomer, and he came into the parlor where he was introduced to Miss Allison.

The manager was a rather tall, slenderly-built man of thirty or thereabouts, with a narrow, thin face, the prominent features of which plainly proclaimed his Jewish blood.

"Come into the private room," the agent said, after the introduction was over.

Then the party went into the little apartment in the rear of the parlor, and all took chairs.

The colonel explained that Miss Allison desired to go with the All Star Company, but deemed the salary to be too small.

"Oh, yes," Ernestine hastened to say, "Miss Allison could not think of acting for less than ten dollars a week and expenses," and she winked slyly at the dramatic agent as she spoke.

That gentleman understood the meaning of this advance. Soapy Sammy was a true Hebrew, and would not be satisfied unless he had a chance to higgle about the price.

"Oh, mine gootness!" the manager exclaimed, speaking with a strong accent. "I cannot afford to pay out all der monish dot comes in at der door to der people, you know."

"Yes, my dear fellow, but you cannot expect people to work for nothing, you see," the agent urged. "Now, it seems to me that Miss Allison is just the lady you want to complete the company."

"Vell, I haf not heard her sing, and I do not know anything about her," the manager responded.

"I will vouch that she is capable of filling the position, and you are aware that I usually know what I am talking about!" the young actress declared.

"Oh, yesh, you are a goot judge, but I cannot gife as mooch as ten tollars. If the lady will go for eight, and gife me a chance to hear her sing, maybe we can arrange der matter," the manager remarked.

"There will not be any trouble about that. We are staying at Mrs. Morrisey's on Ninth street, and if you will take the trouble to come down there, Miss Allison will show you what she can do in the vocal line. Mrs. M.'s piano is not a first-class instrument by any means, but I will manage to get the music out of it," Ernestine declared.

"That is a capital idea!" the colonel exclaimed. "I am satisfied that Miss Allison will suit you, and if you are wise you will close the contract with her as soon as possible, for if you do not I shall certainly offer her to somebody else, and then you will be left, which will not be right," and the colonel grinned at his joke.

"Ah, yesh, dot ish v't you always say!" the manager declared. "Mine gootness! if I had engaged all der people dot you offered me, and paid them their prices, I should haf to haf a national bank at mine back."

"Oh, you are solid this time, Sammy, and the chances are big that you will make a small fortune out of the show!" the theatrical agent exclaimed, and then he hurried back to the front office to attend to more visitors, while the manager escorted the two ladies to the street.

There they took a down-town car and got off at Ninth street.

Down the street, in the direction of the theatrical boarding house, they walked.

They crossed Third avenue, and as they gained the sidewalk on the eastern side, came face to face with the unctuous Mr. Gallagher, much to the amazement of that gentleman.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TINKER IS DISAPPOINTED.

GALLAGHER was advancing to cross the street, and so he came face to face with Irma.

"Why, is it possible?" he exclaimed, with uplifted hands. "Do my eyes deceive me? Miss Allison, is it really you?"

"Yes, sir," the girl answered. "I am no ghost."

"Upon my word! I was never more astonished in my life!" Mr. Gallagher exclaimed, assuming a solemn air. "Ah, Miss Allison, I feared that you had found a watery grave, and it was with a sad heart indeed that I carried the awful tidings to young Mr. Beamish on that dreadful night. I searched all over the ferry-boat for you, and when I was not able to discover any trace I was sure that you had been precipitated into the water by the mad rush of the affrighted passengers; but, thank Heaven! you escaped the danger. We have made arrangements to advertise for intelligence of your whereabouts or for the recovery of your body in all the daily newspapers. Young Mr. Beamish took the matter very much to heart; I do not remember to have ever seen him so much affected by anything before. If you had been his own sister he could not have manifested more concern over the matter."

"I am very much obliged to him indeed," Irma remarked. "It is very kind in the gentleman to take so much interest in a stranger."

"He is a noble young man, and it is just his nature to—Excuse me; I will see you again!"

And in the most abrupt manner Mr. Gallagher ran into the saloon which was on the corner, suddenly getting very red in the face.

"Well, of all the queer proceedings!" Ernestine remarked, as the three proceeded on their way. "You do not want to wait for him, do you, Irma?"

"No, why should I? There is no need now for me to trespass upon Mr. Beamish's kindness."

"Certainly not; but I must say, of all the strange actions that I ever saw this is really the queerest," Ernestine remarked. "Why, the man bolted as though he was afraid that some one was after him."

"I don't like der looks of der fellow," the Hebrew gentleman observed, with a wise shake of the head. "He seems to me like one of dem sharks that play der bunco game."

Soapy Sam was a man of the world, and had seen a deal of life during his sojourn on this planet; therefore his judgment in regard to men who lived by their wits was a most excellent one.

"I gathered from his speech that he is the man who met you when you landed in New York," the young actress remarked.

"Yes."

"Well, I must say that I am like Mr. Josephs; I do not like the man's looks, and if he is not a rascal I am greatly mistaken," Ernestine declared.

"Der fellow is a bad egg!" Soapy Sam exclaimed. "And he bolted just now either because some creditor was coming, or he caught sight of an officer and he was afraid der man was after him."

It was on the tip of Ernestine's saucy tongue to say, "Ah, you know how that is yourself, Mr. Josephs, don't you?" for the cunningness which the Hebrew manager had displayed in the days of his adversity in dodging anxious creditors and sheriff's officers with writs of attachment had made him renowned; but she resisted the impulse on account of Irma's presence. She did not think that it would be quite the fair thing to "give away" the manager before a stranger.

The three reached the boarding-house without any incident occurring on the way, and there Irma sung while Ernestine played.

Soapy Sam was a good judge, and he soon saw that the young girl was well worth the small salary she demanded.

"You have acted?" he asked.

"Oh, yes!" Ernestine hastened to reply before Irma could open her mouth. "She has been considered good enough to play Yum-Yum and Josephine—of course with a country company."

"Ours is a first-class party, and we play nearly all of the big theaters," Mr. Josephs observed.

"You will find that Miss Allison will be up to the mark in all particulars," the young actress asserted, in the most confident way.

The manager made another attempt to get the young lady to go for less money, but Ernestine, who did all the talking, declared that such a thing was not to be thought of, and at last Josephs said they could consider the matter settled, and he would instruct the colonel to draw out

the contracts, on which Miss Allison could go to the dramatic agency and sign at any time; then he took his departure.

Irma could not conceal her delight, and when she was alone with Ernestine she threw her arms around her neck and kissed her in the most affectionate manner.

"I shall never be able to repay your kindness," she declared.

"Well, if you can't don't try," responded the young actress, with the air of a philosopher.

Leaving the friends to discuss the prospects of the coming tour, we will return to Mr. Gallagher and explain how it was that he took such an abrupt departure.

The Hebrew manager's shrewd guess was correct.

Gallagher had hastened into the saloon because he saw a detective officer coming down the street, a man who bore him a deadly hatred because the officer had arrested him three times and had been obliged to release him on account of not being able to prove that he had committed the crimes of which he was accused.

The detective was nettled by his ill-success, and in order to get even with the wily Mr. Gallagher had made it his business whenever he saw him in conversation with any one on the street or in any public place to step up and say:

"Do you know who this man is? If you don't, you want to keep your eyes well peeled, or he will skin you out of all you have. He is Reddy Gallagher, the Tinker, one of the worst bunco men in the business."

The moment Gallagher caught sight of the detective, and saw that he was coming straight for the corner, he knew he must get out, for he understood that the officer would surely "blow the gaff" on him—that's the thieves' argot for an exposure.

And if the country girl got an inkling of his true character it would put a stop to his being able to assist the "governor" in his schemes.

This was the reason that he retreated into the saloon in so great a hurry. He had an idea that the officer had not observed him, and he proposed remaining in the place long enough to allow the detective to pass, and then he would come out and endeavor to overtake the girl.

Gallagher was terribly annoyed at this unfortunate circumstance.

"By jinks! if this don't beat all!" he muttered, as he gained the cover of the saloon. "To think that I should have the luck to meet the girl, just by accident, and then have this infernal fly-cop come along, before I had a chance, too, to find out where she was staying or anything about her. It is enough to make a man swear until he is black in the face."

Gallagher sampled the lunch-counter and then called for a glass of ale, and after he had drank it, prepared to go forth again.

"The fly-cop has had ample time to get by, but it is big money that the girl has got out of the way, and I will not be able to find her. Luck seems to be running clean against us, all through this affair," he muttered, as he started for the entrance.

He pushed the door open a little ways, so he could look out.

The detective was not in sight.

Encouraged, Gallagher advanced into the street, but he had no sooner got fairly upon the sidewalk when the detective, who had concealed himself in a doorway close at hand, advanced.

Gallagher cast a quick glance around; the country girl was not in sight, and a smothered groan escaped from his lips.

It was really too bad to strike the trail, and then be thrown from it in this way.

The detective misunderstood the meaning of the look which the other cast around.

"There is no use of your trying to bolt," he declared, "for I would be after you like a shot."

"Oh, really, now, Mr. Farrell, I hadn't any such idea in my mind," Gallagher protested.

"Gammon! you must not try to fool me! What have you been up to?"

"Nothing, upon my sacred word of honor, I assure you."

The detective laughed scornfully.

"Of course I believe you!" he exclaimed, in sarcasm.

"You can in this case, I assure you."

"Oh, no, too thin!" the other asserted. "You ran the moment you saw me, and now, when you found that I had you dead to rights, you had a notion of bolting."

"You have misunderstood me; I am not 'wanted' for anything, and there is no reason why I should run."

"Better come down to the Central Office and see the chief, anyway," suggested the detective, whose suspicions were aroused.

It was no use to argue the question; to the chief of police Gallagher was obliged to go, and there submit to be cross-examined, but as there wasn't any one to make a charge against him he was released with a warning to be careful how he attempted to do any business in the city.

Gallagher departed, thoroughly disgusted with the way things had gone.

"The governor will be mad all the way through," he muttered. "But it isn't my fault. I did the best I could. Wouldn't I like to put a knife in this blasted fly-cop, though?"

CHAPTER XXII.

STANCH ON THE TRAIL.

As the reader will probably remember, the detective, Mr. Solager, better known to fame and the rascals of the metropolis as the Countryman, had assured Mr. Foxcroft that his shadows would keep watch upon the country girl from the time she landed in New York.

Therefore the lawyer was not astonished at receiving a telegram from the detective, which reached him an hour after he received the letter which the girl had written from Brooklyn, and a second telegram sent from New York, telling of her change of quarters to that city.

The detective's telegram was a brief one:

"Have lost I. Can you post me?"

Foxcroft meditated for a few moments over the matter, and then, as he had no important business pressing, determined to take a trip to the city.

So he wired the detective that he would arrive on the evening train.

Mr. Solager met him as he came out of the dépôt.

"I am glad to see that you understand the necessity of acting promptly in these cases," the detective remarked.

"Well, as it happened, I was able to come to New York, and in a matter of this kind a personal interview is so much better than writing."

"No doubt about that."

"I shall probably stay in the city for a week or so, and I usually go to the Fifth Avenue Hotel. I do not suppose that it makes any difference as far as our business is concerned where I stop."

"Oh, no, not at all. The only point is to select some place where we will be able to converse without danger of being overheard, and a big, first-class hotel like the Fifth Avenue is as good as anywhere."

The pair crossed to the New York side and took a carriage, which speedily landed them at the hotel.

Foxcroft registered, a room was assigned to him, and to it he repaired, accompanied by the detective.

"Miss Allison has met with quite an adventure," Foxcroft remarked, after he and his companion were comfortably seated.

"Yes, and the accident to the ferry-boat completely threw my man off the track," the detective replied. "As I told you, I had a spy in waiting to shadow the young lady, and he reports that she was met on the New York side of the river by an elderly gentleman who had a carriage in waiting. Both got in and were driven to the Jersey City ferry. My man followed in a cab and got on the same boat with them, but after the accident he could find no trace of the girl, although the man was on board. He was rather in doubt what to do, for his orders were to shadow the girl, and it seemed to him that nothing could be gained by tracking the man, for it was evident from his anxious inquiries that he was completely puzzled by the disappearance of Miss Allison."

"She was thrown into the river and rescued from the water by a tugboat. Here is her letter in which she gives an account of the affair."

The detective took the letter and read it through carefully.

"She sent me a telegram announcing that she was safe as soon as she reached Brooklyn. The letter came the next day, and about the same time I got another dispatch from her announcing that she had moved to New York, and she gives her address on Ninth street."

The detective examined both telegrams.

"I know this Miss Herbert," he remarked. "Very nice girl—very much of a lady—very talented! A superior girl in every respect. I did a little detective work for her about a year ago. She had some jewelry stolen which I managed to recover for her, and, in my opinion, Miss Allison is extremely lucky in securing such a friend."

"Well, I am glad to hear that," Foxcroft declared. "I take a great interest in Irma, and I want to see her get along."

"She is in good hands as long as she remains with Miss Herbert," the other asserted. "Egad! it was no wonder my shadow was thrown off the track! An accident of that kind would have baffled the best man that ever followed on a trail."

"It certainly was very strange."

"Now, I want to look into this escort business a little," the detective said. "My shadow is of the opinion that this elderly gentleman who met Miss Allison is a little crooked."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Foxcroft in astonishment. "There must be some mistake. Mr. Beamish, of Beamish and McCaul, is one of the best men in New York."

"Large, florid-faced man?"

"Oh, no, small, with gray hair and long beard."

"Not the party at all!" Then the detective consulted the girl's letter. "Humph! She doesn't give any particulars, merely says she was met at the ferry by a gentleman sent by Mr. Beamish."

"Yes, that is true."

"Well, now, I put great weight in what my man says; he is a shrewd little fellow, and can smell a crook as a dog scents his game. And what the deuce was the girl taken over to Jersey City for? Are there no boarding-houses in New York?"

"It does seem rather strange," the lawyer observed, thoughtfully.

"My idea is that it will bear looking into, and I propose that after we get through this little talk we take a cab and call upon Mr. Beamish so as to see who it was he deputed to meet the girl."

"The suggestion is a good one. His house is near at hand—in Second avenue near Twentieth street."

"All right, we will call on him. And now, Mr. Foxcroft, I think I have a little bit of good news."

"I am glad to hear it."

"It is my opinion that I have got on the track of the two strangers who were talking with old man Bindley on the North road about buying his farm."

"You have a suspicion that they were a couple of confidence-men?"

"Yes, and if they were a pair of bunco-men—a brace of rascals, it is probable that they were acting with the man who murdered Miss Allison. Some one shadowed me in the town, and did the job in such a skillful manner too that though I burst up the game, yet I was not able to get a good view of the man who was trying to work it."

"Now to my mind it does not seem to be probable that the man who did the murder would play the spy upon me; he would employ some lesser rascal—some one of about the build of these bunco-workers."

"The surmise seems reasonable."

"Well, I have been acting on that theory, and the moment I got in town I set to work to find out what all the bunco-men had been doing."

"Ah, yes, I see," the lawyer observed, following the recital with the greatest interest.

"One strong point was in my favor, and that was the peculiar circumstances which attended the bunco-men's attempt to make old man Bindley a victim. It is my opinion that the fellows worked their game so cleverly that they would have succeeded in fleecing the old farmer had not death stepped in and spoilt their game."

"It certainly looks that way."

"Now, as a lawyer, Mr. Foxcroft, you must have observed, during the course of your professional career, that almost everybody in this world talks too much."

The lawyer laughed.

"Well, yes, I believe you are right about that."

"Many a man, and many a woman, have gotten into scrapes, which they might just as well have kept out of, if they had only had sense enough to have held their tongues."

"No doubt whatever in regard to the truth of that," Foxcroft declared. "If people only had sense enough to hold their tongues when they ought to do so, lawyers would lose half their business."

"And detectives would not catch many rascals," the other added. "The average man usually gives himself away. He cannot hold his tongue. He must tell somebody of what he has done, and that disclosure works his ruin."

"It is the ancient legend of King Midas. The slave who knew the king's secret must needs tell somebody, and being afraid to trust it to a fellow mortal, whispered it to the reeds, and when the wind blew, the reeds proclaimed to all the world, 'King Midas has asses' ears!'"

"How these old stories do hit it!" the detective exclaimed. "But that is the idea, every time. Now, in this case, I argued: the men could not work their game on account of the sudden death of their destined victim, and I reckoned that the chances were about a thousand to one that they would tell some of their pals how near they came to making a big strike."

"Yes, yes, it was shrewdly calculated."

"So I got at my stool-pigeons, and sent out word that I wanted information in regard to this matter, and this evening, about five o'clock, I received notice that one of the most noted of the New York bunco-men had just come back from a trip, and that he had come within an ace of pulling off the biggest kind of a prize, but the 'sucker' had died before the trick went through."

"You have struck the right man undoubtedly."

"Yes, I think so; the fellow is known as Reddy Gallagher, and among his pals is called The Tinker, because he is a tinker by trade, but it is many a long day since the scamp has done an honest hour's work. He is working now in cahoots with a sneak thief, one Michael Mackenzie, known as Soap Mackenzie—when a boy he worked in a soap factory."

"These two men have been away from New York for a couple of weeks, but now they are back in their old haunts, and they seem to have money, too, although as far as can be gathered

from their talk, they did not get any boodle on their last trip."

"What do you infer from that?"

"Why, that they are in the service of some big rascal who is keeping in the background, and if I can succeed in getting at him, it is my notion I will not be far away from the man who killed Miss Allison."

"Well, I think your conclusion is warranted by the facts in the case," the lawyer remarked, after thinking the matter over for a few moments.

"I have set certain machinery to work, so to speak, by which I hope before this night is over to find out who it is that is putting up the money for these two bunco-men. If I can discover the man, I think the game will be in my hands. Well, that is all that I can say at present, and now we will call upon Mr. Beamish, if you please."

The lawyer was agreeable, and the two descended to the pavement.

A carriage was procured, and the pair went on their way to the old lawyer's domicile.

CHAPTER XXIII.

GETTING AT THE TRUTH.

MR. BEAMISH was at home, and was much pleased to greet Mr. Foxcroft.

On the way to the house the detective had warned the lawyer not to allow Mr. Beamish to suspect that anything was wrong, so Mr. Foxcroft introduced the sleuth-hound as "a client of mine who is taking in the sights of the city."

Mr. Beamish expressed himself as being delighted to make the acquaintance of the gentleman, and then he inquired concerning Miss Allison.

"She is safe, although she had a narrow escape," Foxcroft replied.

"Well, although I had no personal acquaintance with the young lady, yet I felt much worried about her, but as no tidings were received I tried to console myself with the old adage that no news was good news."

"It was correct in this case," Foxcroft remarked. "But how did it happen that you sent her to Jersey City? I should have thought you would have got her a boarding-house in New York?"

The detective had suggested the putting of this question before entering the house.

"That was the way the matter was arranged," the old lawyer replied. "She was to go to a very nice boarding-house on Fourth avenue, the place where my typewriter, an extremely estimable lady, resides. I intrusted to my nephew, Richard, who is a clerk in my office, the duty of meeting Miss Allison and escorting her to the boarding-house, but it seemed fated that everything should go wrong in this matter. Richard was taken suddenly ill, just as he was getting ready to go to meet the lady, so was obliged to delegate an acquaintance, who happened to be at hand, to the duty."

To this gentleman he gave a card with the address of the boarding-house written upon it, and instructed him to hire a carriage, but in some way the gentleman lost the card, and so started with Miss Allison for Jersey City, where his family resided."

"I should have thought he would have driven to your nephew's house and got the address from him," the detective observed.

"Well, bless me! now I come to think about the matter it certainly seems to have been extremely stupid of the man not to have done that; but then, people do just such stupid things sometimes."

"Yes, he probably didn't think, but acted on the spur of the moment," Foxcroft remarked. "By the way, what is your nephew's address? I should like to call on him before I leave town so as to thank him for the interest he took in my protégée."

"Richard will be glad to see you, of course. You remember him as a lad in our office?"

Lawyer Foxcroft nodded.

"Well, he has grown to be a fine young man. Very attentive to business, and very careful in his conduct. It is a source of great pleasure to me to know that my brother's son bids fair to turn out so well. You knew my brother, Mr. Foxcroft?"

Again the visitor nodded.

"He was wild—very wild, so different from all the rest of us, and then, he made such an unfortunate marriage—the victim of the vilest kind of an adventuress, and then, his shocking death—both he and his wife cut off in the very bloom of their youth in that dreadful hotel fire! Ah! though years have come and gone since then, I can never recall the subject without being deeply affected."

"It is very natural indeed, I am sure," Foxcroft remarked.

"Yes, yes, it was a sad affair, and I had great fears that the boy might prove to be wild when he grew up, but on the contrary he is as steady as a clock; a model young man, a strict church member, and entirely free from all the vices so common to the young men of the day."

"I can understand how satisfied you must be with such a record," Foxcroft remarked.

"Oh, yes; his address, by the way, is the Hotel De Rahan, on Sixth avenue. I do not

know exactly where it is situated, but it is my impression that it is somewhere near the junction of Broadway and Sixth avenue."

Having procured the information of which they were in search, the visitors withdrew after a short conversation upon subjects foreign to our story.

When the pair were in the carriage, and the driver had started the horses on the return trip, Foxcroft asked:

"What do you think about this affair?"

"Well, I don't exactly know," the detective replied. "I shall have to have an interview with this model clerk before I can make up my mind."

"I judge from your tone that there are some doubts in your mind in regard to Mr. Richard Beamish."

"Yes, there are," the other admitted, frankly. "It is the old gag, you know, he is too good to live."

"And yet the fact that a man is inclined to be moral and religious ought to be in his favor?" the lawyer urged.

"Of course, and I am not saying that such a statement gives me a prejudice against him. Now I am not much on religion—that is, I would not, in the eyes of the world, be considered to be religious because I am not a regular church-goer, but if you come to cipher the thing down, I reckon I have got more religion than nine-tenths of the men who sit in the pews on Sunday. My experience as a detective teaches me to distrust men who make a parade of their religion—who introduce it in business matters, and take pains to tell everybody how good they are, and how much good religion does them."

"You think they wear the livery of Heaven to serve Satan in?"

"That is the idea precisely, and if you only knew how many good men of that kind I have been obliged to clap the bracelets on in the course of my professional career you would not wonder at my distrust of business men who go about telling how moral and good they are. Now, this young fellow may be all right. He may be a model young man, but I prefer to wait until I see him and get a chance to examine into his life, outside of the office, before I pass an opinion in regard to him."

"The idea of his sudden illness and the deputing of the stranger to meet Miss Allison, seems a little odd to me," Foxcroft observed, thoughtfully.

"Yes, and the idea of the man losing the address and taking the girl over to Jersey City, because he did not know where else to take her, is a little fishy."

"It certainly seems so."

"My notion is that it was a game to get the girl away, and the man who is at the back of it is the one who killed the woman and stole the documents!" the detective declared. "You know that it was my idea, right from the beginning, that sooner or later the murderer and thief would be after the girl, for if Miss Allison told you the truth about the matter, the papers are of no use to anybody but Irma."

"No doubt about that."

"I did not expect that the man would act quite so promptly in the matter, although I did put a shadow on her the moment she arrived in the city."

"The accident to the ferryboat upset both his plans and yours," Foxcroft observed.

"Yes; and from the way things are at present, the chances are big that he has lost track of her."

"It would be wise, then, for me to keep her address a secret?"

"I certainly would not say anything about it to any one," the detective advised. "I will put my shadow on the girl's track again to-morrow morning, and do you know, Mr. Foxcroft, I think it would be a good idea to let this young actress, Miss Herbert, have a little insight into this game."

"Do you think that would be wise?"

"I do, indeed," the detective replied, firmly. "Miss Herbert is one woman picked out of a thousand. She has been on the stage since she was a child, has traveled all over the country, and really has had more experience of the world than the average man of sixty. She is quick-witted, as keen and bright as a diamond, and anybody who gets the best of her will have to get up mighty early in the morning."

"Such a friend will be of great value to Irma," the lawyer observed, thoughtfully.

"Yes; and we can make her still more valuable by allowing her to know a little of the game," the detective urged. "All we need to tell her is that Miss Allison is threatened by secret foes, and that if she will keep her eyes open she may be able to warn Irma of traps which the country girl would not be apt to see."

"You are right; the idea is a good one."

"I think so. I will contrive to see Miss Herbert to-morrow and have a talk with her on the subject."

"What about this Hotel de Rahan—what kind of a place is it?"

"It is a little furnished room house, really, not a hotel at all. They rent rooms by the day or week; it is a respectable house, cheap and un-

pretending, despite its aristocratic name. The young man has a room there and gets his meals where he likes. There are dozens of hotels of the kind in New York. If I remember rightly, there is a little saloon on the street floor, and by pumping the bartender there I may be able to learn something of Mr. Richard Beamish."

"But if he is such a moral young man he will not be apt to be a patron of a saloon."

"Well, moral young men drink sarsaparilla sometimes, you know," the detective replied, dryly.

When they arrived at the hotel, Foxcroft entered, while the man-hunter went through the cross-street to Sixth avenue, and proceeded northward on that thoroughfare until he came to the hotel of which he was in search.

When he entered the saloon under the hotel no one was there but the bartender, and the moment he caught sight of the detective he threw up his hands, staggered back, growing as white as a ghost, and cried:

"Lord have mercy on me!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

PUTTING ON THE SCREWS.

THE detective was about as surprised to see the man behind the bar as that individual was at his appearance, but having such a complete command over his features he did not make it manifest.

"How do you do, Mr. O'Shea?" he said.

"For the Lord's sake, man; I hope you have not come to trouble me?" the bartender exclaimed, still pale and scared.

"Why should you think that I want to trouble you?" the detective inquired. "Have you been in any mischief lately?"

"No, I give you my word that I hav'n't," the other exclaimed, earnestly. "I told you that if I got out of the trouble I was in I would be careful not to get into any more scrapes."

"Yes, so you did, and I hope you have lived up to that promise."

"I have! I will take my oath to it!" the man declared.

"That is right, and I am glad to hear it. I always like to see a man keep a promise of that kind."

"You have not come to trouble me then?" the other asked anxiously, evidently with a lingering doubt in his mind.

"Oh, no, why should I if you have been keeping all straight?" the detective asked.

"I know you ought not to," the bartender said in a hesitating way.

"Of course not. It is only crooked men who have reason to tremble at my approach."

"Well, that is the way it should be, yet I have known of men who had the misfortune to once get into trouble to have the very life hounded out of them by the bloodhound who hunted them down."

"Yes, yes, I understand—blackmail! Well, I am a bloodhound it is true, but I am not that kind of a dirty dog," the detective remarked in his quiet way. "And you need not be alarmed. I was compelled to hunt you down once, but, if you remember, I believed the story you told, that it was the first time you had ever committed a crime, and it was to save yourself from actual starvation that caused you to yield to the impulse."

"Yes, I told you the truth and you believed me."

"And not only that, but I told your story to the stranger whom you had wronged, and he—a big-hearted Westerner—was not willing to make a charge against you, and so you not only got off, but the man you victimized gave you money so you could take a fresh start."

"Yes, that man and you saved me from a life of crime!" the bartender exclaimed. "Ever since that time I have got along nicely. I paid him back his loan long ago, but when you walked into this place a few moments back you gave me the cold shivers, for you are the only man, besides this Western stranger, who knows anything about that scrape, and I was sure that you had come to denounce me!"

"That would be a very mean thing to do."

"Oh, yes, but there are plenty of men in this world who would think they ought to do it. Give a dog a bad name and hang him, you know."

"That is true."

"Now I have a good place here, my boss trusts me, and I have given perfect satisfaction ever since I came, but if some one was to go and tell him that I had once been in trouble, then the chances are big that I would get the sack at once, and I might have a hard time getting another job."

"That is so; but you need not worry; your secret is safe as far as I am concerned. I did not come after you, and had no idea of seeing an old acquaintance when I came in," the detective explained.

"Well, I am glad of that, I can tell you! It is a load off my mind!" the bartender exclaimed, with a sigh of relief.

"I am here strictly on business—in search of information."

"Anything I can do for you I will, gladly!" the other declared.

"Do you know Richard Beamish, who has a room up-stairs?"

"Oh, yes, very well; he's one of our regular customers. But, I say, what is the matter? has he been getting into any trouble?"

"No, no, I have got to see him on a little business matter. I want to get some information out of him, and so I am desirous of finding out just what kind of a man he is, then I will know how to get at him."

"Yes, I see; of course it will be easier for you to do your work if you find out how to take him," the bartender remarked.

He was an intelligent young fellow, and so had no difficulty in comprehending the situation.

"That is it, exactly!"

"Well, Dick is a pretty good fellow, no harm in him to speak of, but a little weak about some things. He is a clerk down-town—I s'pose you know that?"

The detective nodded.

"And though he blows once in a while about getting big wages, yet I rather think there is a good deal of gas about that," the bartender observed, shrewdly. "To hear him talk, one would think he got forty or fifty dollars a week, but I guess that fifteen or eighteen is about the size of it; he wants to be a sport, too, and I think, from what I have heard, that he puts in about all his spare time at a pool room on the next block. It is my opinion that the sharks up there gobble up about all the money he gets hold of, for I know that he is generally hard up."

The detective was not surprised at this disclosure, for he had investigated the record of "model" clerks before.

"A little soft, eh?" he queried.

"Yes, wants to be a sport—a high-roller, and all that sort of thing. I reckon the sharks up there play him for a sucker about all the time."

"Well, if he is that kind of a man, I do not think I will have much trouble in getting the information I want out of him."

"You just give him the idea that you think he is a sport of the first water, and you can do anything you like with him!" the barkeeper declared.

"Much obliged!" said the detective, and then he took his departure, proceeding up the street toward the sporting resort mentioned by the barkeeper.

"This young man has evidently been used as a tool," he murmured, as he reflected upon the interview. "And the chances are big that he has been made a dupe; it is hardly possible that the man who is putting up this game would trust any of his secrets to such a fellow as this clerk is said to be. How shall I handle my man—wheedle or force him to speak?"

The detective meditated over the matter for a few minutes.

"I will not decide in regard to that until I see how he talks."

"I think I will be safe in going into this place; none of these sporting gentlemen will be apt to know me, for I have never had occasion to do business with any of them."

By the time that the man-hunter had come to the end of his reflections he was at the door of the saloon.

There was a bar-room on the ground floor and a room up one flight where pools on the horse-races were sold.

The detective sauntered into the saloon; it was well-filled with people, for it was the general lounging-place for the sports of the avenue.

Solager sat down at one of the tables and called for a glass of ale, and while he sipped the ale in a leisurely manner he had an opportunity to examine the people in the place.

"I wonder if I can spot my man by his likeness to his uncle," he muttered, communing with himself.

But he did not have to trouble himself about this matter, for hardly had he begun his scrutiny of the men in the saloon when a tall fellow, well-dressed, with a coal-black mustache of prodigious size, came into the saloon, and, after glancing around, hailed a young man leaning on the end of the counter conversing with the bartender.

"Hello, Beamish, old man! have a drink?"

The detective knew the speaker to be one of the Broadway statues, so-called, a gambler, whose business it was to haunt the leading hotels of the metropolis and "steer" strangers who seemed to be pigeons worth the plucking to gambling-dens.

This speech seemed to fix young Beamish's identity.

He took a drink with the sport, chatted for a while, and then, when the other departed, exchanged a few words with the bartender and left the saloon.

The detective had his eyes upon him, and followed immediately.

He had taken the measure of the young man, and had decided that he was one who could be more easily frightened than coaxed.

The detective overtook Beamish before he had gone fifty feet from the saloon.

He came up alongside of him, nodded in the most familiar manner, saying:

"This is Mr. Richard Beamish, I believe?"

"That is my name," responded the other, rather crossly.

He was out of sorts, for he had backed the wrong horses that day and had been pretty well cleaned out.

"I would like to have the pleasure of a little private conversation with you," the detective said, in his smooth, easy way.

"What do you want?" Beamish exclaimed, snappishly.

"Well, I want to have a talk with you upon an important matter; but I cannot explain fully here in the street. Suppose we go down to your room at the Hotel De Rahan."

"How the deuce do you know where I live?" exclaimed Beamish, who was inclined to be ugly.

"Why, that is no secret, is it?" asked the detective.

And he laughed in the face of the young man.

"Well, I don't know about that. It isn't any of your business!" Beamish declared, angrily.

"Don't you be too sure, young man!" exclaimed the detective with an entire change of tone. "Now I am not in the mood to stand any nonsense. I want a talk with you, and I am going to have it. I am a detective-officer!" and as he spoke he opened his coat and allowed the other to catch sight of the badge pinned to the lining.

"I don't understand what business you can have with me," Beamish said in a sulky way.

"If you will come with me to a private place, where I can talk with you, I will speedily explain."

"Suppose I refuse to go?"

"Then to-morrow I shall wait upon your employers and relate to them how one of their clerks amuses himself outside of office hours."

"It is no business of theirs!" Beamish declared, getting red in the face.

"Well, I don't know anything about that. I am not predicting how they will regard the matter. I shall make my report and they can do as they like."

Beamish hesitated for a moment, then he saw that he was in the toils and yielded.

"Come along! I will talk with you."

CHAPTER XXV.

ANOTHER LINK.

THE young man conducted the detective to his apartment in the hotel, invited him to be seated, and then said:

"Now, fire away!"

"All right, what I have to say doesn't amount to much, and I am going into the matter to satisfy my own curiosity, which has been excited. It is about this Miss Allison, whom you were told to meet and didn't. Now I want to know how it was that you did not meet her, and came to send this stranger in your place."

"Well, you see, I was taken suddenly sick—"

"Gammon!" cried the detective in supreme contempt, "that ghost-story may do for your uncle, but it will not go down with me. I know better!"

"It's the truth!" Beamish protested, getting very red in the face.

"No, it isn't, and you know it!" Solager cried, emphatically. "It is no use for you to attempt to cram any yarn of that kind down my throat! It is too thin!"

"You will not get any other yarn out of me!" the clerk replied, doggedly.

"I will give you just five minutes to take that back," and the detective-officer took out his watch. "Five minutes to reflect, and if at the end of that time you do not speak, you can depend upon it that to-morrow morning I will put your employers in possession of a bit of your history which will be apt to make their hair stand on end! Will they not be astonished when they find that their model, moral, religious clerk is a high-roller of the first water—or aspires to be; one of the lights of the turf—an ornament to the pool-rooms of the metropolis, a man who knows a deal more about the state of the betting market than he does of the great religious questions of the day?"

Beamish winced, turning red and white by turns.

"What are you driving at anyway?" he said at last. "Why do you take an interest in the affair? What is it to you?"

"To satisfy my curiosity only, as I told you right at the beginning," the detective replied.

"Come! the five minutes are about up, and you can bet all you ever expect to be worth in this world that I will be as good as my word if you are obstinate. But why shouldn't you speak? What difference does it make to any one if you give the snap away? It isn't a hanging matter, is it?"

"No, of course not; all there is to the thing is that I made an ass of myself, and this friend of mine, Mr. Gallagher, tried to fix the matter so I would not be blamed."

The detective pricked up his ears, metaphorically speaking, when he heard the name of Gallagher, but the expression upon his features did not change at all.

"Well, now, that was kind of him—that was acting the part of a true friend," the detective

observed. "Tell me all about it. This Mr. Gallagher must be a mighty good friend of yours to take all this trouble."

Beamish complied with the request, told how he had made Gallagher's acquaintance, and went with him to his room on Fourth avenue; how they had played cards there, his being overcome by the liquor, then how his new-made friend had tried to cover up his folly by going for the girl.

"Ah, yes, I see, that explains the whole matter," the detective exclaimed, his face expressing the most perfect satisfaction. "You see, I thought there was something crooked about the affair, for your sudden-illness story sounded like a fake to me, and that is why I wanted to look into the matter; but I see it is all right, and I am satisfied!"

Then he rose to depart.

"I say, old man, you will keep quiet in regard to my little fun out of office hours?" Beamish exclaimed, persuasively. "Hang it! a man must see a little of life, you know! 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy!'"

"Yes, that is all right, but look out that you don't play too much!" the detective warned. "It is no use for you, or any other outsider, to try to get the best of these pool fellows. It is hard work to beat a man at his own game."

"Oh, that is all right! I only take a little flyer now and then; but I will pull up short now, I promise you! I will bear your warning in mind."

"You will be wise to do so," and with this caution the detective departed.

But the moment the door closed behind the departing man, young Beamish shook his fist after his visitor in the most vindictive manner.

"You infernal hound! I will try my best to get even with you for this night's work!" he cried, in a voice full of suppressed passion.

"But the scoundrel didn't fool me, for all he talked so smoothly. He has some deep purpose in view, or else he would never have troubled himself about this matter. Perhaps he has got some grudge against Gallagher, and hoped to get a chance to strike at him through this affair. But then he did not seem to know Gallagher, and I don't see how he could have told that the sport had anything to do with the matter if I had not let it out."

"One thing is certain: I will hunt Gallagher up this very night and put him on his guard, so that if the detective is trying to get a crack at him, he can be prepared for it!"

And the clerk acted on this idea with wonderful promptness.

He merely waited a sufficient time to allow the detective to get out of the way, and then he hastened forth in search of the sport.

The Countryman felt extremely well satisfied as he descended to the street.

"Another link in the chain," he muttered, as he walked slowly along down the avenue.

"Of course the Tinker made a fool of this fellow; he was decoyed to the room in Fourth avenue, and his liquor was drugged on purpose so that Gallagher could get the chance to meet the girl."

"The accident to the ferry-boat, which snatched the girl out of the hands of the plotters, upset their plans, and then they had to come back to this flat again, thinking that through him they might gain intelligence of Miss Allison."

"By Jove! the man at the back of this scheme is a genius, and if I can succeed in snaring him it will be a feather in my cap!"

Then the detective fell to meditating as he walked along.

"I must go slow so as not to alarm the game. My stool-pigeons must do their best. No use to attempt to shadow such old birds as Gallagher and Soap Mackenzie, for they would soon tumble to it."

"The strong point in my game is to keep a good watch on the girl, for the odds are great that this man in the background who is pulling the wires will discover her again, particularly as she is going upon the stage, and then he is sure to endeavor to get her again into his power. So, by procuring Miss Herbert's services, I shall be able to get timely warning if any attempt is made to get at the girl."

"Hadn't I better warn her at once?" the detective questioned, abruptly. "This scoundrel is mighty quick in getting in his work; he may discover the girl at any time, and it is my notion that after he once discovers where she is he will strive to get her again in his power as soon as possible. Decidedly then, the quicker I put Miss Herbert on her guard, the better."

Acting on this idea, the detective proceeded at once to the theatrical boarding-house, where he asked to see the young actress.

He was ushered into the parlor, and Miss Herbert soon appeared.

While the Countryman was waiting for her to come he examined the apartment for the purpose of discovering whether he could speak freely without danger of being overheard.

The modern detective resembles the wild red Indian in being always on the watch.

The apartment was fitted up in the regulation manner common to boarding-houses, and the detective saw that, with the doors closed, there

was not much danger of anybody being able to play the spy upon the interview.

Miss Herbert remembered the detective at once, and expressed her pleasure at meeting him again.

The Countryman came immediately to business.

"I know that you are a level-headed young lady, and so I do not hesitate to intrust you with the particulars of an important matter," he said.

And then he explained the affair in full.

The young actress listened with the utmost attention.

"Well, you can rest assured that I shall be glad to do anything I can to help Irma," she declared, when the detective ended his recital.

"I have taken a great liking to her, for she is a dear, good girl."

"Of course, to a certain extent, I am working in the dark, for I do not know the facts connected with these papers which were stolen in such a mysterious manner, yet from the circumstance that attempts have been made to get possession of Miss Irma, I am satisfied that there is considerable money connected with the affair, or else these men in the background would not trouble their heads about the matter."

"Irma has no suspicion that anything is wrong," Miss Herbert said. "For I possess her entire confidence, and she would surely have confided in me if she had any idea of the truth."

"Well, here is a point on which you can give me some advice," the detective remarked. "You are well acquainted with the young lady. Is it advisable to allow her to know just how matters are?"

"Yes, I think so," the actress replied, immediately.

"Irma is a very level-headed girl, and is remarkably self-possessed, particularly when it is considered that she has lived in the country all her life, and has very little actual knowledge of the world. If she understands that danger threatens it will be certain to place her on her guard, and with both her and myself upon the watch, it will not be an easy matter for even the smartest of rascals to play a trick."

"Yes, I believe that you are right about this," the detective remarked.

"I think so. If Irma was a different kind of a girl—nervous and flighty, I would not advise such a course, but, under the circumstances, I believe it would be for the best that she should know all the particulars of the affair."

"Yes, I agree with you, and, by the way, would you mind explaining the matter to Miss Irma so she will understand—all the particulars?"

"Certainly not."

"It is my rule to always keep in the background if I possibly can, and that reminds me to caution you that when you see me in the future, in the presence of strangers, you must not allow any one to suspect that we have met before."

"I will be careful, for I understand how necessary it must be sometimes for you to keep people from suspecting your business."

The detective thanked the young actress, and this terminated the interview.

"I think I have got a pretty fair start in this matter," The Countryman observed as he walked toward Broadway. "And if I do not succeed in nabbing my men it will be because they are extra smart."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THREE DESPERATE MEN.

AND now we will change the scene again to the apartments occupied by Paddlewick in Fourth avenue.

Soap Mackenzie was stretched out at full length upon the lounge in the front room, smoking a short-stemmed clay-pipe, when the entrance of Paddlewick interrupted his meditations.

Soap rose to a sitting posture.

"Any news?" Paddlewick asked.

"None."

"You posted Gallagher?"

"Yes, he said he would see Beamish this evening, and when he comes he may be able to tell what has become of the girl."

"It is one of the queerest cases that I ever had anything to do with," Paddlewick remarked, taking a seat in the large easy-chair by the table as he spoke. "It seems to me that luck has been dead against us in this affair ever since the girl came to New York."

"You are right there, governor."

"The scheme was planned as nicely as anything could be, and it ought to have succeeded."

"And so it would if it had not been for the accident to the ferry-boat," the other observed.

"Yes, that certainly appears probable, and then after losing the girl, and you succeeded in locating her again, the fire interfered and destroyed the clew."

"Some superstitious folks, governor, would be apt to conclude that these 'ere things were warnings that you had better not go on with the scheme," Soap remarked.

"Well, I am not superstitious!" Paddlewick exclaimed. "And when fate seems to enter the lists against me, as in this affair, it only

makes me the more determined to carry out the plans which I have formed."

"It is a big thing for a man to win a game when luck is ag'in' him," Soap remarked.

"Ah, yes, but Dame Fortune is an exceedingly unreliable and uncertain jade, you know," Paddlewick observed. "And although in this affair she certainly has not smiled upon my efforts, yet, when she finds that I am not at all discouraged by her frowns, she may conclude to favor me."

"Never say die!" Soap Mackenzie cried. "I'm blamed if that ain't the ticket, and no mistake!"

The conversation was interrupted at this point by the appearance of the wily Mr. Gallagher, and the moment he made his appearance the others judged by the expression upon his face that he brought news of importance.

"Well, here we are again," the new-comer remarked, as he helped himself to a chair.

"And, gentlemen, I want to remark that this 'ere little game that we are engaged in is running the queerest of any game that I ever had anything to do with in my life."

"Tell us something that we don't know!" Soap Mackenzie exclaimed.

"Anything new?" Paddlewick inquired.

"Heaps!" the other cried. "In the first place, I came face to face with the girl herself on Third avenue to-day!"

"Well, that was a piece of luck!" Soap cried.

"I am not astonished," Paddlewick remarked. "Luck has been running dead against us, and it is only natural that the tide should change at last."

"It hasn't swung around much in our favor yet—that is, not in this case," Gallagher observed.

"How so?" Soap Mackenzie inquired, full of interest.

"The moment I saw the girl, of course I rushed forward and greeted her—expressed myself delighted at the meeting, and told how alarmed I had been by her mysterious disappearance, and then, just as I was going to ask her how she had managed to escape, and where she was staying, down the street came that mean fly cop, Farrell, and I judged that it was wise for me to get out as soon as possible, so I took a hasty leave of the girl and dived into a saloon on the corner."

"You were afraid that the detective would go into your record right in presence of the girl?" Paddlewick observed.

"Yes, I knew he would do it, for he has sworn to make the city too hot to hold me; he is angry because he couldn't jug me when he tried to have me sent up the river about three months ago."

"You were wise not to give him a chance to expose you right before the girl," Paddlewick remarked.

"I tell you what it is, Tinker; you want to put a knife in that fly cop some dark night!" Soap Mackenzie observed, indignantly.

"You can bet your life that I would like to!" Gallagher exclaimed. "The miserable hound has sworn to spoil my business by 'blowing the gaff' on me every time he sees me in company with strangers, and when I say him coming while I was talking with the girl, I knew that he would jump at the chance to tell her what a scoundrel I was."

"Oh, we will have to lay him out some night!" Soap Mackenzie declared, in a tone of firm conviction.

"I hopped into a saloon, thinking that it might be possible that the fly cop would go by without troubling his head about me; but I wish I may die if he didn't wait outside until I came out, and then he ran me down to Headquarters. He thought because I had cut my lucky when I saw him coming that I had been up to some game."

"There wasn't anything against you, of course," Paddlewick observed.

"Not a thing; and after a warning from the superintendent that I had better be careful how I attempted to do any business in the city, I was allowed to go."

"But this interruption prevented you from following up the girl," Paddlewick observed, a dark look on his face.

"Yes; I lost all trace of her, and it was mighty aggravating, you know, after having had the luck to fall in with her in such an unexpected manner."

"Yes; I was saying to Soap here just before you came in that fortune was not favoring us in this game, for, though we had planned in as skillful a manner as possible, yet, just by accident, our best-laid schemes have been upset."

"Yes; that is certainly so," Gallagher admitted.

"Have you seen Beamish, by the way? You must keep up your acquaintance with him, you know, for by his aid we will be able to locate the girl," Paddlewick remarked.

"I have just come from the young man," Gallagher replied.

"And you have just spotted the gal ag'in, hey!" Soap Mackenzie cried.

"No, I have not. He does not know anything about her. No word has been received at the office from her," rejoined the other.

"It may be possible that she does not know where the office is situated," Paddlewick suggested. "There must be some reason of that kind connected with the case, or else she would surely have notified them of where she was stopping. It is evident that she has succeeded in finding friends, although she is a stranger in the city."

"Yes; she was with a good-looking young lady, who was nicely dressed and looked as if she amounted to something," Gallagher remarked.

"Well, she may notify the Beamish people at any time," Paddlewick continued. "So be sure and see the young man every day, and if we don't get on her track pretty soon we will have to take to promenading Third avenue. As you met the girl there once, the chances are good she may be met again."

"Well, I have got a little bit of news for you which I got from this young Beamish which, I fancy, will prove interesting," Gallagher observed.

Paddlewick guessed from the manner of the other that it was important, and so he told him to go ahead.

"There is a party who has tumbled to the little game that we played on Beamish," was Gallagher's startling announcement.

"Is that so?" Paddlewick exclaimed, while Soap Mackenzie stared, open-mouthed, in astonishment.

"Yes, a detective, rather an oldish man, broad-shouldered, and red-faced, who looks like a farmer."

"It is that infernal Solager, the Countryman Detective!" Paddlewick cried.

"Not a doubt on it, for that 'ere description fits him to a hair!" Soap Mackenzie declared.

"There isn't any question that he is the man," Gallagher observed. "He hunted young Beamish up, told him that he was a detective, and wanted an explanation of how it was he sent another man to meet Miss Allison instead of going himself. Beamish tried to give him the story that we fixed for him, but the man was fly and would not have it at all, and as he had taken the pains to post himself concerning young Beamish's record, he was able to put the screws on so effectively that Beamish was obliged to give the snap away."

"Owned up, I suppose, that he got so drunk that he could not go, for he does not suspect that we made a tool out of him," Paddlewick remarked, thoughtfully.

"Yes, that is true enough, but it is my idea the Countryman will be smart enough to jump to that conclusion!" Gallagher declared.

"You kin bet yer sweet life on that!" Soap Mackenzie asserted.

"Yes, you are right!" Paddlewick said, after thinking over the matter for a few moments. "He is too keen a trail-hound not to suspect that there is some one in the background pulling the wires. Evidently he had some such idea when he hunted up Beamish, and it seems to me, boys, that this circumstance is one which needs our immediate attention."

"You bet it does!" Soap exclaimed. "This 'ere Countryman Detective is one of the worst coves on the force! I think I would sooner have any of the rest git after us than to know that he was on our track."

"How was it that Beamish came to tell you about the matter?" Paddlewick inquired. "I should have thought he would have been warned to keep quiet."

"I don't doubt he was, but he was so full of liquor when I met him that he could not keep the affair to himself. He had to confide in somebody and I came along just in time," Gallagher explained.

"The Countryman has got on the track, and if he is not driven off he may succeed in making it warm for us," Paddlewick remarked.

"I reckon that if we are pushed we are three desperate men!" Gallagher exclaimed. "And perhaps this infernal fly cop will find it out before we are through with him."

"Yes, that is our game!" Paddlewick declared in a tone of firm conviction. "The man is dangerous, and we must destroy him or he will be apt to destroy us. It is his life or ours, and in such a case the man who hesitates to strike a desperate blow is a fool!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE STOOL-PIGEON.

As the reader has probably discovered by this time, the Countryman Detective was eminently fitted by nature for the business he pursued, and, thanks to the precautions he took to keep himself in the background, there was not a man on the detective force of New York who was as little known to the criminals of the great city as Ephraim Solager.

He made it a rule never to be seen lounging in the neighborhood of Police Headquarters. If he had business there, after it was transacted he departed as quickly as possible, and if any one noticed him arriving or departing, they surely would have judged from his appearance that he was some countryman in quest of justice.

But, of course, it was necessary for a man in his line of business to have some headquarters

where he could be found at certain times, and therefore the Countryman Detective had a room in an old-fashioned brick house in Houston street, a few blocks from Police Headquarters.

The house was on a corner, and the lower part was occupied by a jolly old Englishman, who kept a chop and ale house, and as all sorts of people were passing in and out of the place from early morning until long after midnight, it was an easy matter for the many queer customers who came to see the detective upon business to come and go without exciting any interest.

Then, too, when it became necessary for the man-hunter to assume disguises, he was able to do so, and to pass in and out of the house without anybody being the wiser, for in addition to the patrons of the chop-house there were half a dozen tenants on the floors above, all of whom followed some calling, and had customers, so there were plenty of people, of all kinds and degrees, continually passing through the door of the house.

If the house had been more private, and only a few people went into or departed from it, some busybody neighbor might have wondered to see the detective enter in his own proper person and come out half an hour afterward disguised as an Irishman, or Italian, or, possibly, as an old apple-woman.

Under the circumstances, though, there was no danger of any gossip being able to take note of the detective's movements.

Then there was a rear entrance to the alehouse, too, on the side street, through the yard, a way much used by the "tin pail and pitcher trade," the people who came for family supplies, and the detective could enter or depart by this passage.

Solager had a small front room on the second floor, and by means of a speaking-tube he could exchange communications with the keeper of the chop-house, who was in the detective's confidence.

Any one, too, seeking the detective, and not having the knowledge of just how to get at him, would have been puzzled upon reaching his door to discover a small tin sign which bore the inscription:

"PROF. SOLAGER,
TEACHER OF THE VIOLIN."

And then, if, in answer to impatient knocks, the door was opened, the seeker for admission would find himself in a sort of an entry, the light for which came through panes of ground glass, and this afforded the detective a chance to scan the visitor and determine exactly what kind of a man he was before admitting him to the apartment.

These precautions were taken on account of the many threats which had been made against the life of the detective by men whom he had brought to justice.

Of course many of these threats were idle ones, and there was no danger that the most of the ruffians who swore in the most bloodthirsty way that they would "cut the heart out" of the detective the first chance they got would attempt to harm him, unless they happened to catch him in such a position that he could not possibly have a chance to defend himself; still, there were a few desperadoes who could be depended upon to do their best to keep the oath of vengeance which they had sworn, and it was on account of these men that the detective took the precaution that he did.

The Countryman sat in his room reading one of the evening journals. He was within a yard of the speaking-tube which communicated with the saloon, for he expected a visitor.

It was not his custom to receive in his apartments any one except men whom he felt sure he could trust and who came upon important business. All others he met in the chop-house.

In the rear of the saloon were "boxes" in the English style—little apartments about five feet square, fitted up with a table and chairs for the accommodation of parties who desired to be private.

In these boxes, by taking care to converse in a moderate tone of voice, a conversation could be carried on without much danger of its being overheard.

About nine o'clock the message for which the detective waited came through the tube.

"Party wants to see you in Number One—Fagin, the Jew."

The detective laid down his newspaper, and, after putting on his hat, proceeded downstairs.

Number One was the first box nearest to the rear door, and when any visitors desired to see the detective they were always directed to this box if it was not occupied.

Solager entered the little apartment.

Seated at the table was an old man whose countenance and costume plainly proclaimed his nationality.

Moses Mindohl he called himself, but was far better known by his nickname, Fagin, the Jew, which some man familiar with Dickens's immortal character had bestowed upon him.

In his time Mindohl had been one of the most notorious "fences" that the metropolis had ever known.

A "fence" is a party who receives stolen property, and the fact is patent that if there were no fences there would be fewer thieves, for if a man could not readily dispose of his plunder there would be small temptation for him to steal, or, at all events, he would confine his depredations to money and such articles as he could either use himself or get innocent parties to buy without difficulty.

Mindohl was supposed to be a wealthy man, although, like all men of his class, he swore he was worth nothing; but, as it is a well-known fact that a fence never gives over one-tenth of what an article is really worth, never paying over a hundred dollars for a thousand dollars worth of "swag," and the old man had been in the business for years before the police broke it up, his statements in regard to his poverty were not believed.

The old Jew now kept a second-hand clothing store in Baxter street, one of the "hand-me-down" shops, where the clothing is always warranted to fit "like der baper on der voll," but the detective knew that he did a little thieves' trade on the quiet, and Solager had come so near to catching him a couple of times that the old Jew, in alarm, had agreed to act as a stool-pigeon for the detective, provided that he would promise not to keep so close a watch on him.

The Countryman Detective agreed to the bargain, for he knew that the old man had a more intimate acquaintance with the cracksmen of the metropolis than any fence in the city.

Since the agreement was made the old Jew had kept faith, and furnished the detective with some extremely valuable information, so when the detective wanted particulars in regard to the bunco men, he notified the Jew, and it was from him he learned that Soap Mackenzie and the Tinker were working together.

Acting on the hint he told the old Jew to be sure and report to him anything that he heard in regard to the two, and now he suspected that Mindohl came in regard to the pair.

It was the truth, and as soon as the detective was closeted with the old Jew, the latter proceeded to explain.

That afternoon Lize Gallagher, the Tinker's wife, had come into his shop and sold him a suit of clothes; a suit which had become too small for her husband, she said, but the old Jew added, with a wink, that it was his opinion Gallagher had never seen the day when he could have got into the clothes, but as it was all straight business, as far as he knew, he bought them. She had complained greatly of the way in which Gallagher was treating her; said she was tired of being abused and beaten, and added that if she was free from Gallagher she knew of a good man who would be glad to marry her. Then, too, she had another grievance: some one had told her that her husband had another wife in Boston, and so she felt extremely ugly toward her liege lord and master, and the Jew judged that if the detective handled the matter rightly, she might be induced to tell all she knew about her husband.

The acute detective immediately suspected a trap, and said as much.

"So help me gracious, I do not know anyting about it if dere ish one!" the old Jew protested. "I thought dot I ought to tells you about der matter, but I will not say dot der womans ish honest in v'ot she said."

"Well, I will look into the matter, and be sure that you keep your potato-trap closed."

The old Jew swore that he would not breathe a word to any one, and then departed.

"When a dog gets hot on the scent there is no way of ending the matter like killing the dog," the detective muttered. "But sometimes it is the dog who does the killing!" And then he chuckled in a dry way.

Clearly he was not much alarmed.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN THE HAUNTS OF CRIME.

As we have stated before, the Countryman Detective was of an extremely suspicious nature, and when he heard the report that Mrs. Gallagher was "out" with her "old man," and in such a state of mind as to lead her to do almost anything to injure him, he immediately suspected that a trap had been set for him.

Of course the old Jew protested that he knew nothing about the matter, and had given the information which had come to him in perfect good faith.

This might be the truth and yet a trap exist.

Then, too, even if the old Jew had his suspicion that all was not right, and thought that certain rascals, who were plagued by the interference of the detective in their affairs, had schemed to make the man-hunter pay dearly for his intrusion into their business, the detective did not feel certain that Mindohl would care to warn him of the plot.

The old Jew was afraid of him and, possibly, might breathe more freely if he was sure that the Countryman Detective would interfere no more in his affairs.

Solager meditated over the matter in the most serious way for fifteen or twenty minutes.

If the report was true, valuable information might be gained.

If it was but a scheme to lure him into dan-

ger, might he not arrange the affair so as to give the men who got it up such a lesson that the rest of the criminal colony would be apt to think twice before they ventured to play a trick upon him?

The first thing to be done was to ascertain if anybody else knew that Mrs. Gallagher was on bad terms with the wily bunco-steerer.

The detective proceeded to Headquarters and laid the matter before the superintendent.

"Well, one thing is certain," the police chief observed after the matter had been duly discussed. "You ought to endeavor to avail yourself of this chance to obtain information, and if the fellows have laid a trap for you, we must try to give them a Roland for their Oliver; in fact, treat them to a surprise-party which will be apt to make them open their eyes."

Then the two laid their heads together to form a plan by means of which they would be able to outwit Mr. Gallagher, and his associates, if that party had indeed prepared a trap to catch the man-hunter.

As far as could be discovered the old Jew had certainly told the truth about Mrs. Gallagher, for after the chief summoned other stool-pigeons, who were acquainted with the woman, they told the same story in regard to the trouble between the husband and wife that the Jew had related.

The chief had instructed a couple of the spies to persuade Mrs. Gallagher to pay him a visit, but this they were not able to do, for when the idea was suggested to her, she refused in the most positive manner, saying that she had nothing to do with the police, and if her husband discovered that she had been in communication with the authorities, he would certainly think she had been plotting some mischief against him, and would be apt to make it warm for her.

Under the circumstances this was a natural conclusion for the woman to arrive at, and the chief observed that if the detective wanted any information out of her it was evident that he would have to go after it.

If there was a trap this would be just what the men who set the snare wanted, and this was what rendered the acute bloodhound suspicious.

"It is a sort of forlorn hope," the chief remarked to the detective when they parted. "But I haven't any doubt that you will pull through."

"Well, I will make a good try for it. You can be certain of that," the detective responded.

The Countryman Detective proceeded in an extremely methodical manner.

Mrs. Gallagher lived in a dingy old tenement-house in Baxter street, near the "Bend," as a crook in the street is popularly called.

The house was in the Italian quarter, so termed because a majority of the inhabitants of the section are Italians.

Through the stool-pigeons the detective ascertained all the particulars concerning Mrs. Gallagher—her residence and her habits, that he deemed necessary for him to know, and then in a disguise so complete that his identity would never be suspected even by his most intimate acquaintance, for a couple of days he prowled around in the neighborhood of Mrs. Gallagher's abode. We say Mrs. Gallagher, for no one had ever seen Gallagher himself in the neighborhood; apparently he had deserted his wife after she had taken up her quarters in Baxter street.

The woman was a scarfmaker by trade, and was now supporting herself by pursuing the business which she had followed in her youth.

No one, apparently, paid any attention to the detective, for there were plenty of idle men in the neighborhood, there being some little saloons hard by which served for lounging-places.

On the third day the detective called upon Mrs. Gallagher, as he had not been able to discover anything suspicious connected with the woman.

On this occasion he appeared in his own proper person and marched into the tenement-house apparently perfectly indifferent whether he was watched or not.

Mrs. Gallagher lived on the third story, and the detective proceeded directly to her apartments.

The tenants swarmed about as thickly in this old barracks as bees in a hive. There were four families on each floor, and each family had two apartments, a rear or front living room, as the case might be, and a dark bedroom attached to it.

It was the middle of the day when the detective called, and as there were plenty of people passing in and out of the house, he did not attract any attention, being clad in his well-worn pepper-and-salt suit, which made him look so much like a countryman.

At first Mrs. Gallagher was not inclined to allow him to come in when she answered his knock at the door, and discovered that it was a stranger, but when he explained that he came to see her on important business, and that, in all probability, it would be some money in her pocket if she would listen to what he had to say for a few minutes, she consented to allow him to enter.

Mrs. Gallagher was a masculine-looking wo-

man of forty or thereabouts, and presented the appearance of being able to care for herself under almost any circumstances.

She placed a chair for Solager, and then took one herself.

The detective surveyed the surroundings with the eyes of a hawk, but he saw nothing suspicious: nor did he expect to see anything, and that was why he made his visit in the broad glare of the daylight.

He proceeded directly to business.

"Mrs. Gallagher, I have been informed that you are not on good terms with your husband," he began.

"That is true enough, but I don't know what business that is of yours, seeing that you are a stranger to me," the woman remarked.

"Well, I am a detective officer," the other explained.

"A detective!"

And an expression of alarm appeared on Mrs. Gallagher's hard face.

"Yes; and, of course, you are aware that your husband has given gentlemen in my line of business considerable to do during the last ten years."

"I know he has been in trouble two or three times."

"Yes; the men at Police Headquarters take considerable interest in Mr. Gallagher's movements, and they would like to be able to take more. That is, they would be pleased to have fuller information in regard to what he is about, and what he has been about, than they at present possess," the detective explained.

"What has he been up to?" inquired the woman, with a well-assumed air of ignorance which did not in the least deceive the acute man-hunter.

"That is just what we do not know and are anxious to find out," he remarked.

"Oh, I supposed that you thought he had been up to some mischief."

"That is exactly what we do think. We know Mr. Gallagher of old, and we are aware that he, as a rule, does not allow the grass to grow under his feet, but he has managed matters so well that we have not been able to discover just what little games he has been playing; so, when we heard that you and he were not on good terms, we thought it possible that you would be willing to give us some information."

"Gallagher would kill me if he knew that I gave him away!" she exclaimed.

"Yes; but he need not know anything about it," the detective remarked. "You can depend upon our keeping the matter quiet, and we will pay you well for any information that you may be able to furnish."

The woman appeared to meditate over the matter for a few moments, and then she said:

"Well, I don't know. I would be running a big risk, but if you can fix the matter so there will not be any chance for Gallagher to find out that I have betrayed him, mebbe I will be able to tell you something that may be useful to you."

"Don't worry yourself about Gallagher. You may be certain that we will keep the matter quiet, and if your information is of any value to us, you may rely upon being well paid."

"I tell you what it is: you must give me some time to think over this matter," the woman said. "Suppose you come here about ten o'clock to-night."

"Oh, no," said the detective, and there was a slight smile upon his face. "It would not be wise for a man like I am to trust himself in such a barracks as this. The stairways are dark; any enemy of mine could easily lay in wait, and with a single knife-thrust settle me as far as this world is concerned."

"Yes, but no one will know that you are coming," the woman urged. "You can be sure that I will not say a word about the matter, for I need money badly, and then, too, I would like a chance to be revenged upon Gallagher for the way he has treated me."

"All right; I will come at ten to-night, and if your information is valuable, you can depend upon getting well paid for it."

"I will see some parties this afternoon who will be able to give me some points about Gallagher, and you can be sure I will get out of them all that they know."

"Do the best you can—the more information, the more money," and with this assurance the detective departed.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SETTING THE TRAP.

"AHA! there isn't any mistake about this matter," the Countryman Detective muttered to himself, as he descended the stairs. "Mr. Gallagher has put up a job on me. If I keep this appointment to-night, he will endeavor to arrange the matter so that I will never be able to keep another one, and this shows that I must be pretty hot on the trail, or else Gallagher and his pals would not be tempted to go to all this trouble."

"Now then, how will the blow be struck?" and the man-hunter pondered for a few minutes upon this question.

"I will be expected at ten o'clock. The stair-

ways are dark, and the chances are big that I will be waylaid either as I ascend or depart; probably as I go up."

"It will be easy for the scoundrels to have a man on the watch, and he can give a signal to his confederates within the house the moment I enter it."

"Then the assassin will be all ready for me, and when I knock on the door, the attack will be made. A single knife-thrust in the back will do my business, and there will be one detective less in the world."

"A nice little scheme!" and the Countryman Detective chuckled in a complacent way. "Do the scoundrels really think that I will be fool enough to walk into such a snare? Upon my word! I do not feel at all complimented by the supposition. I had supposed that the rascals had a better opinion of me. I see I will have to make a desperate effort, so as to be able to show them that I am not such a fool as I look."

When the detective emerged onto the street, he sauntered away in the direction of the Bowery, and though apparently careless in regard to the surroundings, yet his keen eyes were everywhere.

But in spite of his scrutiny he was not able to see anything suspicious, yet for all that he was satisfied he was watched, but the watchers had hidden themselves away so that they could not be seen.

There was a small beer-saloon across the way, and any one could easily note through the window-screen the movements of the people in the street without being seen.

"Well, I will try to show these fellows a trick or two worth knowing between now and midnight!" the detective muttered as he turned into the Bowery, then he took a car and proceeded up-town to Police Headquarters.

The result of the Countryman Detective's confab with the superintendent of police was that a middle-aged Italian peddler, with a basket of notions on his arm, made his appearance in Baxter street about two o'clock in the afternoon, and when he got into the tenement-house where Mrs. Gallagher resided, his endeavors to sell his wares were wonderful.

He knocked at every door, and would not be satisfied until the tenants came to see what he wanted; then with all the Italians he held long talks in his native tongue, and in almost every instance succeeded in making a sale, for the man was willing to fairly give his goods away.

Mrs. Gallagher was the only one whom he did not press to buy.

When she said that she did not want anything he seemed to be satisfied and moved on.

An hour or so after the peddler departed, an Italian book-agent made his appearance with a life of Garibaldi, which he was willing to sell on the most liberal terms, even taking as low as five cents a week, and this man had such a persuasive way with him that he managed to gain admittance to almost every room in the house.

As the reader will see, by the time that these two men got through with their business, what they did not know of the house and its inmates was hardly worth knowing.

Both men were detectives in disguise, and their mission was to ascertain just how many "crooked" men there were in the old barracks.

At ten o' the night, Baxter street in the neighborhood of the Bend, is an extremely busy place. The denizens are all-night birds, and few of them go to bed until midnight.

At a quarter to ten two men, who looked like Italians, came slouching through the street, stopped for a few moments in front of the old tenement-house and looked around them.

The two were the close pals, Reddy Gallagher and Soap Mackenzie.

"Well, everything seems to be all right," Gallagher remarked. "I don't see any police spies around."

"No, no more do I," Soap replied. "I reckon we have fixed this trick so it will work this time without any trouble. This Countryman Detective is a slippery customer, but the chances are big that we will fix him to-night."

"Yes, his thirst for information will be his ruin. Ah, well, he will not be the first man who has gone down to destruction in that way."

"You are going to give him a chance though to get out?"

"Oh, yes; the programme is to show him that he is in a trap, but if he is willing to give his word to mind his own business in the future he can go free."

"Yes, but I say, old pal, it seems to me that you are taking a mighty big risk in working the thing in this 'ere way," Soap Mackenzie said in an extremely sober manner. "Why, the odds are a hundred dollars to a cent that he will say that he will agree to that, and then, when he is out of the scrape, he will turn around and nail every mother's son of us!"

"Ah, my dear Soap, we are not going to let him get out of the trap a live man, no matter what he says or promises," Gallagher replied. "That is only a bit of taffy that we will give him so as to throw the fellow off his guard, and render it easier for us to get at him."

"How about the risk of getting caught in this job?" the other asked.

"Oh, there is very little. We shall use the knife—the Italian weapon, and the chances are big that after the job is done the supposition will be that he was stabbed by some drunken Dago who mistook him for somebody else."

"Well, that racket ought to work."

"Yes, the governor had an Italian, whom he could trust, hire the room next door, and by the fire-escape in the rear we can get to my rooms without any one being the wiser. Then, after the detective is knifed and the investigation is begun it will be found that the unknown Italian who rented the next apartment is among the missing," Gallagher explained.

"Ah, yes, I see."

"Now, no one in the house has ever seen this man, and the agent only saw him once, so it will be hard work for the police to get any description of him, and it would not do them much good if they did, considering that he sailed today in a ship for Italy, but when he is found to be missing in this mysterious way, the odds are big that everybody will believe that he is the man who did the killing."

"Oh, yes, it is a beautiful scheme!" exclaimed Soap Mackenzie, rubbing his hands gleefully together. "And I cannot see any reason why it will not work right up to the handle."

"The governor was afraid that he would be apt to fill the street with detectives. You see, he was afraid that our man might suspect that a trap had been set for him, but it is my idea that he is not so smart as the old man thinks."

"We are able for him, anyhow!" Soap Mackenzie observed, complacently, and then the two passed into the house.

They made their way through the dark entries to the third floor, and unlocking the door of the apartment next to the one occupied by Mrs. Gallagher, entered.

They passed through the room and went out on the fire-escape, which consisted of a small iron balcony, leading from the window of the one apartment to the window of the other, and from it a ladder led to a similar balcony above, and also one below.

By means of the fire-escape, it was an easy matter for the pair to get into the room occupied by Mrs. Gallagher.

The woman was in readiness to receive them, and just as Soap Mackenzie climbed in through the window—Gallagher went first—a shrill whistle came from the yard below.

"That is the signal that the detective has entered the house!" Gallagher cried. "Here! conceal yourself in the bedroom!" and then the two hastened into the small inner room.

CHAPTER XXX.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

THE plan which the ruffians had formed was an extremely simple one.

After the detective entered the room Mrs. Gallagher was to detain him in conversation for about five minutes before she made the admission that she did not dare to tell him anything for fear of her husband's anger.

Then, when the detective went to depart, the moment he opened the door she was to turn out the light, and Gallagher was to strike him in the back, through the open door.

The five minutes' delay was to give time for a couple of pals, Italian crooks, to see that the coast was clear on the outside.

One was to keep guard below and the other above, and by pretending to be drunk and quarrelsome it would be an easy matter to prevent anybody from going up or down until the fatal blow was struck.

It was well that the plotters arranged the scheme in this way, for if they had planned to attack the detective as he passed upward through the dark way, they could not have carried out the design, for immediately after the detective came three Italians, who had apparently drunk just enough liquor to be jolly, and in the darkness they evidently mistook the detective for an acquaintance, for they came up the stairs all in a bunch with him, clapping the man-hunter on the shoulders, and talking to him in the most familiar manner, then, when the detective stopped at Mrs. Gallagher's door, they went on and entered the front apartment on the same floor, and on the same side of the house.

Mrs. Gallagher admitted the detective without delay when he knocked and placed a chair for him, a chair with its back to the bedroom door, but the detective, in the most natural manner possible, moved it to the center of the apartment by the side of the table, upon which the lamp stood, and sat down, facing the door which led into the inner room.

"You have come right on time, sir," Mrs. Gallagher remarked, with a glance at the clock, ticking on the mantel-piece.

"Oh, yes, I always try to be punctual in these little business matters," the detective replied.

"Well, sir, I really don't know what to do about this matter," the woman remarked, pretending to be very uneasy.

"Don't know, eh?"

"No, sir."

"How is that?"

"Well, you see, sir, it is a difficult matter for a lone woman to decide upon."

"It is a simple matter, it seems to me."

"If Gallagher should ever find out that I have been giving him away to the police he would be the death of me."

"No doubt he would be apt to be ugly."

"And mebbe what I know is not of any importance, anyway."

"Well, as far as that goes, I cannot say until I learn what it is."

"Mebbe I had better not say anything, if it is all the same to you."

"Suit yourself, of course," the detective replied, apparently not at all bothered by the decision to which the woman had come.

"I hope you will not be offended with me," the woman remarked.

"Certainly not; that is all right. If you have a fear that harm may come to you if you speak, then, most certainly, you would be very foolish to say anything, but you ought to have made up your mind in regard to this to-day, and not have put me to the trouble of coming down here tonight," and as he spoke, the detective rose to his feet as if to depart, putting both of his hands in the pockets of the loose sack coat he wore—a sort of light pea-jacket—in a careless way.

"Yes, I know I ought to, but I did not make up my mind what to do until night."

"You have pretty nice apartments here, Mrs. Gallagher," the detective said, and then he fixed his keen eyes upon the door leading into the bedroom.

"Another room there?" and he nodded toward the door.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you mind opening it so I can see what the other room is like?"

"Indeed I do, for it is not fixed at all!"

"Oh, I don't mind that; oblige me now," the detective remarked, in the most persuasive way.

"Oh, no, sir, I couldn't think of it!" exclaimed the woman, trembling with agitation. She was not a fool, and she knew that it was no idle whim which had taken possession of the detective.

"Really, Mrs. Gallagher, you are a very obstinate woman!" the detective declared, with a shake of the head. "A very deceptive woman, too; but, my dear madam, you must not make the mistake of thinking you can deceive me, for I fancy I understand this little game as though I had planned it myself."

The under jaw of the woman fell, and she stared at the acute detective in blank amazement.

"You do not want to open the door of that room because there are men in there who are waiting for a good opportunity to put a knife in me, and you do not want me to know that they are there until the time comes for them to spring their little trap, but the scheme is not going to work as smoothly as it might, for I have tumbled to the little game, and I propose to break it up."

The concealed ruffians saw that the detective had penetrated their designs, and, rendered desperate by the fact, they sprung into the room knife in hand, but no sooner did they make their appearance than the Countryman Detective had them covered with a brace of revolvers which he drew from his pockets.

"Go slow!" he warned. "These are self-cockers, and before you can get a chance to use your cheese-knives I will lay you out as stiff as a couple of ramrods."

The baffled ruffians glared at the defiant speaker.

"You do not stand any show, anyway," the detective continued. "You arranged a little trap here for my especial benefit, and, not to be outdone at that sort of thing, I got up a trap for you. You did not succeed in catching me, but I certainly have succeeded in catching you!"

Then the Countryman Detective gave a shrill whistle.

In the bedroom from which the pair had come appeared three men—the three Italians who had escorted the detective up the stairs.

Originally, the front and rear apartments had been rented as one, and a door between the dark bedrooms afforded communication.

The detectives had taken advantage of Mrs. Gallagher's absence during the afternoon to arrange the door so that they could gain easy access to the rear rooms.

Hardly had these men made their appearance, when the door leading into the hall opened and the blue coats and bright buttons of the metropolitan police appeared.

The captain of the precinct in person was in charge of the squad.

"Catch anything, captain?" the detective asked.

"Two," the officer responded.

And the pals of the baffled plotters, the men disguised as Italians, were hustled to the front, handcuffed, and looking extremely disgusted.

"You will perceive, Mr. Gallagher, that I did not make the mistake of underrating your abil-

ity, although I fancy that you made that error in regard to myself," the detective remarked.

"In addition to these two squads there is a third, who are posted in the yard, so as to cut off all flight by means of the fire-escapes. It was my desire to capture every man in your gang, and I believe, from the present showing, that I have succeeded in my purpose."

"I think the game is yours, this time!" Gallagher exclaimed, throwing down his knife.

"Oh, you bet it is!" Soap Mackenzie cried, imitating the example of the other in casting away his knife.

"Hold out your wrists so I can snap the bracelets on," the Countryman Detective remarked, pocketing his revolver and producing two pair of handcuffs.

The pals obeyed.

"Got us dead to rights, eh?" Gallagher observed, with a grim smile.

"Yes, I think I have," the Countryman replied.

"What is the charge?"

"Assault with intent to kill," Solager answered.

"Oh, come; go light on us now!" Soap Mackenzie cried. "We did not assault you, you know."

"No; because I held you at bay with my bakers; but you made the attempt, all the same," the detective declared.

"All we can be tried for is attempted assault, then," Gallagher remarked.

"That is so, sure as you are born," the other ruffian asserted.

"Well, I am no lawyer, and that is a legal point which the judges will have to settle," the detective remarked. "It is my opinion, though, that you are in a pretty bad scrape, and you both will be mighty lucky if you don't go up the river for a good term of years."

Mrs. Gallagher thought it well to put in a word here.

"I hope that you don't bear me any ill will," she said. "The Lord knows I had to do what my husband said, and I couldn't help myself!"

"You will have to come along, Mrs. Gallagher, but the chances are that you will not be severely punished," the Countryman Detective replied.

Five minutes later all were en route for the famous city prison, The Tombs.

CHAPTER XXXI.

INTERVIEWING THE RASCALS.

THE superintendent of police was very much pleased at the clean sweep that the Countryman Detective made.

"And now that we have got the gang locked up, the deuce will be in it if we do not succeed in getting the truth out of some one of the fellows," the chief observed.

"Come the old game of telling each one that some of the others have squealed, and that he had better join the procession and make a clean breast of it, or he will get left?" said the detective.

"Yes, it is a venerable and time-honored device, and I do not doubt that the ancient Romans used to work it, but we usually get there, all the same," the superintendent observed.

"I am a little afraid this time that the scheme will not be successful," the Countryman Detective said with a wise shake of the head.

"Think these birds are too old to be caught by chaff, eh?"

"Well, it seems to me that the case stands about this way. The minor members of the gang—the fellows who would be apt to squeal under such a pressure, will not be apt to know anything about the matter that we are anxious about. They can tell how they were induced to go into this affair, but we don't want any evidence in regard to that, for we have got the men dead to rights as it is."

"That is true enough," the superintendent remarked.

"Tinker Gallagher and Soap Mackenzie are the only ones of the gang who can give any information, and I do not believe that we can succeed in getting either one of them to peach by pretending that the other has turned State's evidence."

"Well, upon thinking the matter over, I don't know but you are right about that," the chief observed. "Both of the men are hard cases, and they have been on the 'cross' ever since I have known anything about them, and two harder nuts to force a confession out of I don't suppose you could strike in the whole country."

"That is my idea exactly," the Countryman Detective coincided. "I will try the scheme, of course, and even if it don't work, I may succeed in getting some points out of one of the two, in spite of their tricks, which may help me."

Acting on this idea the detective paid a visit to the Tombs, where the crooks were confined.

He called upon Soap Mackenzie first, for it was his idea that Gallagher was the mastermind of the two, and so he reserved him for the last.

Soap greeted the detective in the most friendly manner.

"Glad to see yer!" he exclaimed. "I don't

bear no malice if it was all through you that I am locked up here."

"You are in a pretty bad box, Soap," the detective observed, shaking his head, gravely.

"Ah, what are you giving me?" the ruffian cried.

"There isn't any mistake about it," the man-hunter remarked, helping himself to the stool, while the prisoner squatted upon the edge of the bed.

"Oh, come now! I am too old a bird to swallow any talk of that kind!" the rascal declared. "I know how I am situated just as well as you do, and I reckon that this 'ere thing ain't going to bother any of us much. What kin you prove, anyway? You were in Gallagher's house, and we wanted you to git out. We knew that you allers carried poppers with yer, and we pulled out our cheese-knives so as to give you to understand that we meant business, and all you kin possibly make out of the matter is that we might have done you up, if we had the chance, but I reckon the law don't punish men for what they intend to do," the fellow remarked, shrewdly, in conclusion.

"You are quite a lawyer, Soap," the detective remarked, with a light laugh, just as if he enjoyed being set at defiance.

"Well, I ought to know something about the law, considering how many times I have been hauled up afore a 'beak,'" the other replied, with a grin.

"A beak—that is the English thief's term for a magistrate," the detective remarked, in a thoughtful way.

"Right you are!"

"Let me see! You have been across the water, I believe?"

"Oh, yes."

"And did you do any work in a professional way when you were abroad?"

"Oh, of course I am just the cove to give that away, and to a man like you, too!" Soap Mackenzie declared, with a chuckle.

"If I remember rightly, you and Gallagher were in England together?" the detective remarked, reflectively.

Soap Mackenzie looked at his visitor in an extremely suspicious way for a moment; it was evident he mistrusted that this carelessly-put question carried mischief with it.

"Well, w'ot if we were?" he asked, after quite a pause. "W'ot odds does it make to any one, anyhow?"

"None that I know of; there is no law against Gallagher and yourself being across the water in company, and I have no doubt that you two had a pretty good time in London together."

"Oh, yes, middling."

"And was it in London that you met the Strangler?" asked the Countryman Detective, in a quiet, matter-of-fact way.

Despite Soap Mackenzie's command over himself, he could not help betraying that he was startled by the question.

An anxious look came into his eyes, although he managed by compressing his mouth firmly to prevent any expression of surprise from appearing on his features; but it is a rare master of dissimulation who is able to keep a guard over his eyes, or to use them for purposes of deception.

The detective saw that his shot had struck home.

"I reckon I don't know what you are talking about," the prisoner remarked, in an uneasy sort of way, after an awkward pause, during which the detective kept his clear eyes fixed earnestly on the face of the other, a scrutiny which the prisoner did not seem to relish in the least.

"Oh, yes, you do," the detective replied, in his easy way. "What is the use of you denying the fact? The Tinker knew better than to do that."

"Yes, yes, that is the old game, of course!" and the fellow grinned, contemptuously. "The Tinker gave everything away! He is just the kind of man to be foolish enough to do that."

"He wants to make the best of a bad job; he is in a hole and is anxious to get out."

"Oh, you can't stuff me now, and there is no use for you to try!" Soap Mackenzie declared. "This 'ere scrape that we are in isn't bad enough to make the Tinker squeal."

"Say! if Gallagher hasn't squealed how is it that I know anything about the Strangler?" the detective asked.

This was a poser, and the prisoner meditated over the matter for some time before he attempted to reply; despite his long experience in crime he was puzzled by this unexpected development.

At last, however, he spoke, taking refuge in a general denial.

"I don't know what you are talking about!" he exclaimed, sullenly.

"Oh, yes, you do; this denial will not do you any good. I am on the track and you are very stupid if you think a simple denial on your part is going to throw me off. The moment I mentioned the Strangler you ought to know that I am onto the game, and if you had any sense you would be able to guess what put me on the scent. If Gallagher hasn't given the snap away,

how is it that I know that you and he were mixed up with the Strangler in that country job down at Oldharbor?"

Again the peculiar look appeared in Soap Mackenzie's eyes, and his face grew a trifle paler.

"Now, if you are wise, Soap, old man, you will make a clean breast of it," the detective continued. "For, you see, this will turn out to be a pretty serious job for you if I succeed in getting you implicated in that murder affair. I understand, of course, that it was the Strangler who got you and Gallagher to put up this job on me. The dog was getting uncomfortably near on the trail and there is no way of putting a stop to that sort of thing like killing the bloodhound."

"The trick failed to work, though, and instead of your catching me I caught you."

"Now you can see for yourself that it is only a question of time in this matter; sooner or later I shall nail the Strangler. I know a deal more about that bit of work at Oldharbor than you give me credit for knowing. I understand that only one man did the trick, although both you and Gallagher were in the thing after the murder was committed. I know who it was that shadowed me down the road on a certain night, and if that party hadn't been remarkably quick on his pins I would have caught him when I doubled back to a dead certainty."

Soap Mackenzie was very much disturbed, and it was evident that the revelation was a great surprise to him, but for all that he swore that he knew nothing about the matter, and he stuck to his denial so stoutly that the detective saw that it was useless to waste any more time, and took his departure.

His interview with Gallagher was equally fruitless. The Tinker was evidently astounded at his knowledge, but he would not admit that he knew anything about the matter, and so the detective was obliged to go away but a little wiser than when he began.

He felt sure of one fact, though—his surmise in regard to the Strangler was correct. The Englishman who bore that title was in this country, and he was the man who had committed the mysterious murder.

The next thing was to find him!

CHAPTER XXXII.

A NEW IDEA.

FROM the Tombs the Countryman Detective proceeded straight to the superintendent of police, and reported to him the result of his labors.

"My dear fellow, it is evident that we are dealing with an A No. 1 scoundrel in this case!" the police chief declared, rubbing his hands briskly together, his manner indicating that he rather enjoyed the prospect. "And it will be a feather in our caps if we succeed in clapping the bracelets upon his wrists."

"Yes, according to the reports that I have received from the men who knew the Strangler in England, he was considered to be one of the smartest rascals in the country, and though he committed a number of atrocious crimes there, yet no detective ever succeeded in running him down."

"It will be a big thing for you then if you capture him," the superintendent declared.

"Well, I will try to do my best. As far as I can find out the man has always chosen to do his work alone, so that it has never been possible for any pal to give him away."

"The fellow is wise," the police chief commented. "In nine cases out of ten we nail the principal through the peaching of a low-lived accomplice."

"That is a fact—that is my experience. Well, this fellow, if the reports are true, always arranges his schemes so that his pals do the working up of the job, or cover his retreat, after the trick is done, but he never allows any of them to see him at work, and usually arranges the matter so that it would not be easy for any of his associates to prove that he was the man who committed the crime."

"A cunning rascal," the superintendent observed. "And it is probably owing to this shrewd method of working that he has been able to baffle justice so long."

"Yes, in this Oldharbor case, as far as I could discover, there was only one man in it—one man committed the crime, and there isn't any signs that he had pals, and if it had not been for the fact that I was spotted for a detective as soon as I arrived in the place, and my footsteps dogged, I would not have suspected that there was more than one man in the job. Upon looking around, though, I heard of these two supposed farmers, who were after a farm, and their mode of operations immediately suggested a pair of bunco-men. Now I have ascertained, beyond a doubt, that Reddy Gallagher and Soap Mackenzie were these two men, and as I am well known to both of them, it explains how it was that my business was known as soon as I struck the town. One of the fellows happened to catch sight of me, and he understood that I was there to look after the man who committed the murder."

"Yes, you are undoubtedly right in your surmise," the superintendent observed. "Now, al-

though this is an extremely difficult case, yet it seems to me that you have succeeded in establishing two things, notwithstanding that you had very little to go upon. The first is, that this notorious English criminal, who is known as the Strangler, committed the murder; the second, this pair of rascals who attempted to kill you, and whom you have lodged in the Tombs, are pals of the man who did the deed, even if it was not the Strangler who committed the crime."

"Yes, I do not think there is any doubt about the matter, although really I have not succeeded in securing any proof which would be apt to convince a jury of the truth of the allegations."

"Ah, well, that will come in time," the superintendent remarked. "Now the main thing to be done is to get at the man in the background. You have secured the pals, and it will be an easy matter to keep them under lock and key for some time, for we can push their trial off. The rascals are smart enough to understand that we cannot do much with them on the present charge. They are taking matters so easy that it is apparent that they have little fear in regard to the result. They undoubtedly feel sure that they will be represented by able counsel, and our game is to discover if they communicate with the man in the background, either through their lawyer, or otherwise."

The Countryman Detective shook his head.

"You think that it will be a difficult matter?" the chief said.

"Indeed I fear that it will be almost impossible, for these men are able and experienced rogues," the man-hunter replied. "They know that I am hot on their track, and I do not think they will be likely to make any move without deliberating over it in the most careful manner."

"That is true enough."

"They understand that the Strangler is suspected to be the man who committed the murder, and that we think they are the Strangler's pals; they are too old birds not to understand that we will be on the watch with the hope of being able to get at the murderer through some communication that they make to him, or some message that he may send to them."

"You are right; the rascals will undoubtedly be on their guard."

"They will be certain to get the best criminal lawyer that money can secure to defend them, and that matter can be easily arranged without the Strangler having to put in an appearance. Even if the lawyer had a suspicion as to the man who is finding the money for the defense, professional etiquette would prevent him from betraying the confidence reposed in him by a client."

"Yes, yes, you are right!" the superintendent exclaimed, after thinking the matter over for a moment. "The way is pretty well blocked, and we would not be wise to calculate upon getting much information in that direction."

"But there is an unguarded side, so to speak, by means of which we may advance to the attack," the detective remarked.

"You are referring to the girl, Irma?"

"Yes."

"Egad! you are right. The chances are that the fellow does not suspect that you are up to his little game in regard to the girl."

"No, I do not believe that he does, and I was careful in my interview with the two men not to say anything to lead them to suspect that I had any idea of the game which the Strangler must play in order to reap any benefit from the crime he committed. The only weak point is that I made an investigation into how it was that Gallagher came to meet the girl. Young Beamish is a dull-witted fool, whose head is muddled by liquor half the time, and it is more than likely that he revealed to Gallagher how I put the screws on him. In fact, I feel sure that he has spoken, and that was the reason why the attack on me was made."

"Yes, it looks like it."

"By keeping a close watch upon the girl I may be able to get at the Strangler."

"Very probable indeed," the chief assented. "Well, the girl is carefully shadowed, so that it will not be possible for any suspicious party to approach her without our knowledge."

"And just there is where I think we have made a mistake."

"Yes?"

"I do, indeed! If this fellow is the first-class scoundrel which he is represented to be, he will be sure to discover that the girl is shadowed, and that will make him wary."

"That is so!" the superintendent exclaimed. "And it is our game just now to induce him to come forward so as to give us a chance to get at him."

"Yes; so I would say, remove the shadows; if he knows that the girl has been watched, and discovers, as he will at once, of course, that the shadows are taken away, he will be apt to jump to the conclusion that we have made up our minds that there isn't anything to be gained by watching the girl."

"And then, naturally, he will think that there is a chance for him to go ahead."

"Just so, and I will have a chance at him."

"Exactly!" and the superintendent chuckled.

"But, I say, how will you be able to tell when the fellow makes a move, if the shadows are removed?"

"I calculate to do a little of the shadow business myself."

"Ah, yes."

"And then Miss Herbert will be on the watch, too."

"A very superior girl she is, certainly—to use the old saying, as smart as a steel-trap!"

"The troupe with which Miss Irma goes starts on the road next week; a Mr. Josephs is the manager, a well-known theatrical man."

"Yes, there are three or four brothers of them," added the police chief. "Which one of them is it?"

"Samuel."

"Ah, I am well acquainted with that young man," and the superintendent laughed. "In fact, he enjoyed my hospitality here for a couple of hours, about a year ago. He was arrested by one of our Headquarters men on the charge of fraud, but when I came to look into the case, I found that it was only a regular professional squabble. He had taken an opera company out, and stranded on the road, but there wasn't any fraud about it. The man would have paid if he could. Some of the party pushed the case, and managed to get him locked up in Ludlow street jail."

"And if I remember rightly, you had something to do with getting him out," the detective remarked.

"Yes, some friends of his came to me, and I never believed in locking a man up because he happens to be unfortunate enough to get in debt and is not able to pay. To my mind, that is a relic of the dark ages."

"Probably, then, he would be glad to do you a favor if he could."

"Oh, I do not doubt it; but what favor do you want me to ask of him?"

"I want an engagement in his comic opera company," the man-hunter replied.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE THEATRICAL ANGEL.

THE superintendent of police lay back in his chair and gave himself up to a fit of hearty laughter for a moment.

"The idea strikes you as being a comical one, eh?" the Countryman Detective asked.

"Yes, it certainly does," the other replied. "Of course, I understand that it is all in the way of business, but, I say, in what line do you propose to shine—are you ambitious to play the gushing lovers, or the heavy villains, or set the audiences in a roar with a topical song?" and then the police chief indulged in another burst of laughter.

The detective laughed too.

"Well, it does seem rather comical, that is a fact, but I am in sober earnest, although I am not vain enough to think that I would be apt to make a hit as a performer. I do not look forward to disporting before the footlights, but in such a traveling troupe there must be men to look after the baggage and attend to giving out programmes, and things of that kind, you know."

"Oh, yes, undoubtedly there must be men to attend to such things."

"Well, now, it ought to be an easy matter for me to get some position of that kind so as to travel with the troupe, then I will be in readiness to receive the Strangler when he puts in an appearance."

"You will assume a disguise?"

"Yes, I will indulge in a clean shave, and stain my face, then, with my hair dyed black, I will be able to pass for a Cuban, and after I am got up I think it will puzzle my most intimate acquaintance to recognize me. The game to play is that I am a man who has played in hard luck—has led a pretty wild life, and is now desirous of settling down and making a fresh start."

"Yes, that yarn will do very well, but, I think it will be better to have your engagement arranged through a third party, for it is my experience of these theatrical men that they are rather inclined to be talkative, and this Josephs would be mighty apt to say that he had a man in the party whom he had employed expressly to oblige his friend, the superintendent of the New York police," the chief suggested.

"That is very true," the detective observed, thoughtfully. "There is hardly a doubt that the man would be apt to give the thing away, and then all the fry would be in the fire."

"Decidedly so."

"It was my idea, you see, that by assuming an humble position of that kind all suspicion would be averted," the man-hunter explained. "It would take an extremely smart rascal indeed to suspect that the humble individual who wrestled with the trunks, and distributed the programmes, the man-of-all-work, ready to run at anybody's call, was a detective officer, watching for a chance to snap the bracelets on his man."

"Your scheme is an extremely good one!" the chief exclaimed. "And chances are big that you will nail your bird. I can easily arrange

the employment business through Judge Bittenhofer; he is a great theatrical man, does a deal of professional business in that line, and is well acquainted with all these Josephs. He can fix the matter without any trouble, and no one will suspect that any one connected with the police has a finger in the pie."

"Well, I suppose the quicker we make the arrangement the better," the detective suggested. "So, if you will see the judge, I will proceed to transform myself into a Cuban gentleman who has seen a good deal of life and has been materially damaged thereby."

"Yes; and in order to make assurance doubly sure I will not approach the judge myself, but get at him through another party, so that there will not be any chance for the secret to leak out."

"That is a wise precaution."

This ended the interview.

The superintendent immediately set about the business, while the man-hunter proceeded to transmogrify himself into a Cuban.

He had one of those stolid faces, none of the features being prominent enough to attract any particular attention, and it was an easy matter to him to so alter his appearance that his most intimate acquaintance would not recognize him.

Circumstances favored the man-hunter. Mr. Josephs had engaged a programme-agent and baggage-man, but the fellow got a chance to go with another company at a better salary than Josephs was willing to give, and on the very morning that the application was made on behalf of the detective the manager received notification that the man would not go, so the situation was open.

Soapy Sam demurred at first to taking a man who had never been in the business, but when he found that the applicant was willing to go for almost nothing, he concluded he had better have a talk with him. When the disguised detective made his appearance he was impressed in his favor, and finally engaged him to go with the party for three dollars per week and his board.

The other man was to get ten, and the wily Hebrew chuckled as he contemplated the saving of seven dollars a week.

Josephs could see that the Cuban—Pedro Gomez he called himself—was a man of intelligence, and he felt sure he would give satisfaction.

Meanwhile the troupe had been busily engaged in rehearsing at one of the up-town halls so as to be ready for the opening.

Josephs had engaged an excellent stage manager, a man who had grown gray in the business, and this gentleman drilled the members of the troupe with all the severity of a military martinet.

It is not the custom among theatrical managers to pay for the days spent in rehearsing preparatory to the public performances, and the performers give their time gratuitously for this purpose; but when the members of the "All Star Comic Opera Troupe" found that Soapy Sam had made up his mind that a good two weeks' rehearsing was required they "kicked,"—to use the vulgate—in the most vigorous manner.

One week they would give, but not two, and then Manager Josephs, with the air of a man who had the backing of a millionaire, announced that rather than have any ill-feeling about the matter he would pay half salaries for the second week.

This was a skillful move on the part of the wily Hebrew, for it at once impressed his people with the idea that he had plenty of money, and they sung his praises loudly.

All but the shrewd Ernestine Herbert; she kept quiet, though, and if she did not see her way clear to praise Josephs's liberality, she did not say anything against him.

To Irma, though, she confided her doubts.

"The rest think that because Soapy Sam is willing to pay this money that it is a sign that he has plenty, but I don't feel so sure of it," she said. "As an old manager, he understands that as we are going to change the opera every night, giving six in the week, we must have the rehearsals, or else we will be apt to make a holy show of ourselves, and he saw that the people were going to kick against giving up so much time, so he compromised the matter, but I don't like the idea of paying out so much money before the show gets on the road. I am afraid that he will use up almost all he has before we get open, and then if we strike two or three weeks' bad business at the start, where are we? I am all right, of course. I took precious good care of that, but I would a heap sight rather the show would run along all right than to get my money by a forfeit, although I will frankly admit that I would take it, all the same, and without any qualms of conscience either, for a bargain is a bargain. I am going to live up to the contract on my side, and I intend that the wily Soapy shall on his."

Another thing that the far-seeing Miss Herbert did not like, as she confided to Irma, and that was that the theatrical angel—the backer of the show—the man who had, and was, to find the money, had not made an appearance, al-

though the troupe had now been rehearsing for nearly two weeks.

"It looks very queer," the young actress said to the country girl; "very queer, indeed, that no one has seen anything of this gentleman who is going to lose twenty thousand dollars before the All Star Comic Opera Company gives up the ghost. He is not a professional, of course; you never hear any regular manager talk in that ridiculous way, and being a 'jay'—that is the polite name that we barn-stormers have for the outside barbarians, upon whose contributed ducats we live—it is the strangest thing in the world that now he has the right to mingle with us gorgeous stage creatures he is so extremely backward in coming forward."

"If I did not know that Soapy Sam had got the money from some one, I should be strongly tempted to believe that this 'angel' existed only in Mr. Josephs's fervid imagination. But the cold cash has been put up, so it is plain that the backer really does exist."

Miss Herbert was only voicing the opinion of the rest of the troupe, who were all wondering why the angel did not show himself, but that very noon Mr. Josephs made his appearance, just as the rehearsal was coming to an end, accompanied by a well-dressed, dignified-looking gentleman.

"There is the backer, sure enough!" Ernestine exclaimed to Irma. The two were standing apart from the rest.

"Yes, I suppose so," and then Irma gave a start of surprise. "Why, I have seen him before!" she cried.

The "angel" was Lawrence Paddlewick.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE INSTINCT OF WOMAN.

"AN old acquaintance, eh?" Ernestine remarked.

"Oh, no, I am not at all acquainted with him, but I saw him once in the country village where I used to live," Irma replied. "He was boarding at the hotel, I suppose, for he was on the piazza, talking with the landlord, when I happened to pass by on my way home from the post-office. It was night, and I should not have noticed him, for I am not one of the kind to stare at strangers, even though I was brought up in the country, if it had not been for the fact that there was a lamp-post on the corner, therefore he got a good view of my face, as I came up, and he exclaimed to the landlord, so I could distinctly hear him, that I was a pretty girl, or something of that kind," and a blush came over the pale face of Irma as she spoke.

"Of course you heard a compliment of that sort without any trouble," and the young actress laughed. "The girl must be extremely deaf who misses hearing such a remark, and, of course, you looked at him to see what manner of man it was who showed such extremely good taste?"

"Well, I will admit that I did steal a glance at him, but it was because I was surprised, and—though perhaps you will not believe it—I was decidedly more alarmed than pleased by the remark."

"Oh, I don't doubt that!" Ernestine exclaimed, playfully pinching the cheek of the other. "There isn't anything of the flirt, or coquette, about you, and I do not doubt that you hurried on as if you were afraid that the man would give chase immediately."

"Yes, I believe I did," Irma admitted.

"And did he follow you?"

"Not that I know of; at any rate, I never saw him again."

"Well, you are all right, anyway!" the other exclaimed, a little maliciously. "He thinks that you are a beauty, and you will be a prime favorite, no doubt. It behoves us girls who have to work hard for our daily bread to stand well with the men who pay us the ducats."

"Oh, how can you say such a thing, Ernestine?" Irma exclaimed. "And you know that it is anything but the truth where you are concerned, for, from what I know of you, I do not believe you would bend an inch to secure the favor of any man on earth, no matter how much money you could secure by so doing."

Ernestine laughed.

"Well, I guess you are right, but then I am a cranky thing, anyway!"

Josephs and Paddlewick took seats in the body of the hall, and remained until the rehearsal was over.

Following Paddlewick, and evidently in attendance on him, came a rather undersized, smooth-faced, English-looking man, the very ideal of a humble, obsequious valet, and he took a seat discreetly in the rear of his master.

Although apparently busy with the rehearsal of her part, and paying no attention to the group in front, yet the keen-eyed Ernestine found an opportunity to make a careful examination of the pair, and the opinion to which she came she revealed to Irma as they paused behind the scenes for a moment at the end of the rehearsal.

"Well, I cannot say that I am favorably impressed with this party, although he is such a heavy swell, with his valet to wait on him!" the young actress declared.

"That is strange now, for there is something about the man that I do not like," Irma declared, slowly. "I do not know as I can exactly explain what it is, but there seems to be something cruel in his face."

"It is the instinct of our sex that warns us against him," Ernestine replied. "And what a wise provision of nature it is, that makes us so superior in that respect to men. A woman's instinct often leads her to the truth, while man, with his wonderful judgment, goes hopelessly astray."

"Now, in this case, I know from what Josephs has said to me that he considers he is much smarter in every respect than this stranger, and he thinks he has all the best of the bargain—in fact, to come right down to the truth, he considers the other to be a flat."

"Oh, I think he has made a mistake," Irma declared, in a tone of conviction.

"That is my opinion; and this smart Aleck of a Soapy Sam will find it out, too, before he gets through, or I am greatly mistaken. This man is no fool, and any one who goes to fry him for one will lose the fat. That is a homely saying, dear, but it is awfully expressive!"

During the last of this conversation the pair had been advancing from the stage to the auditorium, and when they emerged from the side door they found that Josephs and the stranger had arisen and moved to the passageway, so that the girls would have to go by them as they proceeded to the street.

"Ah, an introduction is in order, I see," the young actress remarked quietly to Irma, when she perceived the position occupied by the pair.

"Well, we will have a chance to see what the gentleman looks like at closequarters, and I hope he will improve upon acquaintanceship."

As Miss Herbert had anticipated, when she and Irma came up to the manager they were introduced to the stranger.

"This is my partner, Mr. Paddlewick," Soapy Sam said, with a dignified wave of his hand. "You want to cultivate his acquaintance, ladies, for he will have charge of the financial department."

"Oh, I am always glad to make the acquaintance of the treasurer," Ernestine declared, never at a loss for a reply.

Paddlewick bowed, smiled, and expressed the delight that it gave him to meet the ladies.

Ernestine had her sharp eyes on him, eager to see if he remembered meeting Irma, but as he betrayed no sign of recognition, she came to the conclusion that the circumstance of seeing the country girl in her village home had passed out of his memory.

There was a little general conversation in regard to the coming tour, and then the ladies went on their way.

"It is evident that he does not remember you," Ernestine remarked, as the two descended the stairs.

"Well, it is not strange, for he only saw me on that one occasion; and then he could not expect to find the country girl a member of a comic opera company."

"That is true enough. What do you think of him?" Ernestine asked, abruptly.

"My impression is no more favorable than it was at first," Irma replied, slowly, as if she was meditating over the matter. "He is evidently a gentleman, well-bred and educated, and he tries to be very pleasant and agreeable, yet there is something about him that I do not like."

"My dear, you have summed the matter up in a nutshell, as it were!" the young actress declared. "Instinct, I tell you! nothing in the world but instinct!"

"By the way, did you notice the man, Tims, as he called him?"

"No, I did not; I saw, of course, that he was there, but I did not take any particular notice of him."

"A smooth, sleek-appearing fellow!" Ernestine declared. "One of those oily, servile rascals who make my flesh fairly creep whenever I come in contact with them. Ugh! oh, don't I hate 'em!"

Irma laughed at this conclusion.

"Oh, it is the truth, you need not laugh!" the other declared. "I never meet one of the class that I am not in fear and trembling that they will lie right down on the ground and ask me to please to do them the favor to walk on them."

"How you do go on!"

"Well, that is the way that this particular class always impress me. The miserable wretches! they are the ones who are always ready to turn and strike you in the back too whenever they get a good chance, and this fellow impresses me as being one of the worst of the kind that I ever met. He is a snake, if ever there was one, in mortal shape!"

By this time the two were at the door which led into the street, and there they encountered a dark-faced, foreign-looking man, rather poorly dressed, who, pulling off his hat with the effusive politeness common to the Latin races, explained that he was the baggage-man of the troupe, and he desired to get the ladies' addresses so he could collect the trunks when the time for starting came.

Ernestine gave the address, which the man

entered in his book, and then, with a low bow, departed.

"Well, upon my word! I believe I am taking leave of my senses to-day!" the young actress exclaimed as they proceeded up the street, after the baggage-man departed.

"Why so?"

"You will laugh, of course, but it seems to me that I have seen this man before and I cannot, for the life of me, tell where, but I will swear to his eyes, although the rest of his features are not familiar."

"That is strange."

"Yes, and it bothers me, for I have a most excellent memory for faces, and when I meet any one whom I am certain that I have met before, yet cannot place them, I am annoyed."

The reader will perceive that the Countryman Detective's disguise was indeed an admirable one to deceive so keen an observer as the comic opera queen.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A DEEP GAME.

"FROM what I saw of this Miss Herbert at the rehearsal to-day, I should say that she was a remarkably smart girl!" Paddlewick remarked, after the ladies departed.

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that!" Josephs assented. "She is one of the rising artists of the day. In fact, there are not six women in the comic opera line who are any better. There are a few who have a greater reputation and command more money; they are better known than Herbert, and have enjoyed advantages which she has not, but when it comes to producing an effect upon an audience, I had about as lief have her as any actress that I know of, and I have seen, and estimated, upon all of them."

Soapy Sam spoke with the air of a sage, and Paddlewick nodded assent like a man who believed every word.

"This other young lady, Miss Allison, too, seems to be pretty smart."

"I do not know much about her; she is new on the boards," the manager replied. "I engaged her through Herbert's recommendation; they are great friends. I never saw her act, but she sung for me, so that I knew that she had a good voice, and she rehearses as though she knew what she was about. She is cheap, too," Soapy Sam said, with a chuckle. "That is because she is not known. If she had any reputation, I would have to give her five times the money that I do."

"Ah, yes, I see. She and Miss Herbert are old friends, then?"

"Yes, I suppose so, for Herbert was very anxious to have her go with the party."

"We start on Monday morning?"

"Yes, at eight o'clock from the Erie depôt. I put the opening week in at Paterson, although I do not expect to make much money; two or three nights is all the town is good for, with so heavy a party as we carry; but as the sharing terms are good, we ought to be able to get expenses, and the week will be a good rehearsal for Philadelphia, where we go the week after."

"Ah, yes, I see. I suppose there isn't anything like an actual performance to get the people up to the work?"

"Yes, you are right about that; one performance is worth a dozen rehearsals."

This ended the conversation, for Josephs was obliged to go to the printer to see about the show-bills, and Paddlewick, with his man following in his rear, like a well-trained dog, went toward Fourth avenue.

He proceeded directly to the rooms—his headquarters—where we have before introduced the reader.

After entering the apartment, and carefully locking the door behind him, Paddlewick sat down in an easy-chair, took out his cigar-case, selected a "weed" from it, and then tendered the case to the valet.

The latter's bearing had entirely changed the moment the door had closed behind the two.

The servility disappeared, and he swaggered to a rocking-chair with the air of a man who felt that he was as good as anybody.

So, when the cigar-case was tendered, he took it with an easy familiarity which plainly showed that he did not consider that the other was his superior in any way.

After the cigars were lit, the two smoked on for a few minutes in silence, and then Tims spoke.

"Governor, don't you think that you had better give me a little insight into this 'ere game that you are playing?" he said. "You see, I am working in the dark, and that is what I don't like to do, because I might make some mistake which would upset the whole thing."

"Yes, you are right there; such a thing *might* happen, but it is hardly probable with such an experienced man as yourself."

"But ain't it better to be on the safe side?" the other argued.

"Oh, yes, I admit that."

"I am a stranger in this blooming country, you know, and the way you work the game here may be a good deal different from the way we do it at 'ome."

"Oh, no, we proceed on about the same lines,

but it is just as well that you should understand what we are up to."

"I can do better work, then, of course," the other asserted. "And I tell you, governor, it was a rare bit of luck for me to run across you on the very day I landed, for I didn't think that I knew a soul in the blooming land!"

"When you come to look around, you will be apt to find a good many of your acquaintances here, 'who have left their country for their country's good.'"

"That may be so."

"Do you happen to know Gallagher, the Tinker, or Soap Mackenzie?"

"Oh, yes, both of 'em were pals of mine once on a time."

"They are in this country."

"Is that so? and are they doing well?"

"Well, they are both in jail at present," and then Paddlewick lay back in his chair and laughed at the look of dismay which came over the face of the other.

"In jail! Well, of all the blooming luck!"

"Yes, but the charge upon which they are arrested does not amount to anything," Paddlewick asserted. "Both of them will get out of the difficulty without any trouble. You see, there has been a rascal of a detective nosing around, trying to bring home to Gallagher, Mackenzie and myself a little country job which he suspected we worked, so the three of us put our heads together to put the fellow in a hole, but he was too smart for us, so Gallagher and Soap were trapped, but they will get out all right, although their being locked up just at this time is a bother to me, for I needed their help in a little game that I am playing."

"Well, I am on hand, governor, and you know me of old; I can be depended upon!"

"Oh, yes, I am aware of that, and it was a lucky chance, both for you and myself, that we happened to meet," Paddlewick remarked. "I have been playing a pretty deep game lately, and luck has been against me almost from the start."

"There is a certain girl concerned in the game, and it is necessary for my success that I should get hold of her; twice she has been in my hands; twice slipped through my fingers, and purely by sheer accident: neither she nor anybody else had anything to do with the matter."

"Blow me tight! if that wasn't a rum go!" the other declared.

"Yes, and in spite of all my search I have not been able to get on her track, yet now to-day I met her; she is that Miss Allison, a member of the comic opera troupe in which I am interested."

"That was a bit of luck, I should say."

"Yes, and this event, following so close on the heels of my meeting with you, just the man I needed, makes me think the tide of luck has changed."

"It looks like it," Tims observed.

"My game is to marry this Miss Allison, and as during this tour we will be constantly together, and I shall make it my business to be a most devoted cavalier to her, it will be very strange indeed if I do not succeed in winning the lady."

"Yes, you ought to do the trick," the other remarked. "But I never put much faith in women. My experience with 'em ain't been pleasant; you can't depend on 'em, like you kin on a man; women are mighty unreliable, and when you expect them to act in a certain way, they are just as likely as not to do something entirely different."

"Well, I shall do my best to win the girl by fair means, but if I find that I cannot, then I shall try foul, for I am determined to have her; not that I care for the girl herself at all, you understand, Tims, but I am after a good bit of money which goes with her, and of which fact she is ignorant."

"Yes, I see, but, governor, how did you happen to get into this comic opera business? Ain't that a leetle out of your line?"

"Yes, but I thought there was some money in it," Paddlewick explained. "Then it was my idea to have Gallagher and Soap Mackenzie go along with me, and I thought we could pick up a trick or two on the road."

"Oh, yes."

"It is the intention to put the party up at first-class hotels, and as we stop a week in a place, it seemed to me that the Tinker and Soap would be able to get some splendid opportunities to do business."

"Right you are, governor!" the English crook exclaimed, his long experience on the "cross" enabling him to see the advantages of the game.

"You see, during the week they would have the run of the hotel, and so would be able to ascertain if any of the guests had money or jewelry worth the picking up, and then, after the trick was done, the chances are about a hundred to one that the detectives would jump to the conclusion that some hotel thief had registered as a transient guest and did the job."

"It is a fine scheme, governor!" the other declared. "And it seems to me that the chances are big that it could be worked all right."

"Yes, and as you are an expert in that line,

more so than either the Tinker or Soap Mackenzie, you will be able to do the job better than either one of them.

"You see, owing to the fortunate chance of the girl being a member of the troupe, I shall be able to kill two birds with one stone."

"Oh, it was a rare piece of luck!"

"Well, now you have the programme," Paddlewick remarked.

"As my valet you will be able to move around the various hotels without suspicion being excited. I am a wealthy English gentleman, you understand, who has gone into this show business just for the fun of the thing. I keep an opera company as other men keep yachts and horses."

"Oh, it is a beautiful game, and it shows what a head you have got!" cried the English crook, highly delighted. "You will collar a good lot of cash and get the girl also to a dead certainty!"

But the speaker knew not the Countryman Detective.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ON THE ROAD.

JOSEPHS'S All Star Comic Opera Company had begun its tour and, contrary to the expectation of the theatrical speculator, played to a most excellent week's business in the lively manufacturing town of Paterson, New Jersey, so that when Saturday night came and Josephs footed up the receipts, he had the satisfaction of announcing that there was a profit on the week of over three hundred dollars.

"It seems to me that we have done pretty well—made a good beginning," Paddlewick observed.

"Well, I should smile!" Soapy Sam declared. "Why, it is really wonderful business! You know what I expected—expenses, and a trifle over—about enough to buy the beer, you know. But it is that Herbert girl! I tell you! she is one of the most taking women on the stage! She has captured this town for all it is worth!"

"She certainly is very clever, and the audiences seemed to go wild over her, and that Allison girl too is good and seems to improve right along."

"You can thank Herbert for the most of her improvement, although there isn't any doubt that she is smart," Josephs observed. "They have the next room to me, you know, and as the walls are thin I can hear Herbert teaching the other one, not only coaching her in songs, you know, but instructing her how to make her lines tell. If you notice, Herbert never misses a point."

"There seems to be a strong friendship existing between the two," Paddlewick observed. "They could not be more devoted to each other if they were sisters."

"Yes, that is so, and I say—you will excuse my speaking about it, you know, but I am an old man of the world and, of course, must see what is going on right under my nose—it seems to me that you are a little sweet on Miss Allison."

"My dear boy, I think that she is the finest girl that I ever met in my life!" the Englishman declared in a very enthusiastic way. "I have met with a great many ladies in my time, for I have been an extensive traveler, but I never encountered one in any part of the world, gentle or simple, who produced so great an impression on me as has this young lady, but do not make any mistake about the matter; my intentions are strictly honorable. I did not think that I would ever marry, but now that I have become acquainted with Miss Allison I believe that if I could induce her to become Mrs. Paddlewick I would forsake the grand army of bachelors tomorrow."

"Well, you have got it bad, I must say!" Josephs exclaimed, considerably astonished by this disclosure. "I perceived that you had taken a notion to the girl, but I thought that it was only a little flirtation on your part."

"No, I am hard hit—I must confess it!"

"Well, I can give you a pointer, I think," Soapy Sam remarked with a particularly foxy smile.

"I shall be glad to have it."

"Get on the right side of Herbert. I can see already that the Allison girl thinks that everything Herbert says is law and gospel, so, if you are wise, you will get Herbert to help you along in your love-making."

Paddlewick thanked the other for his advice, and said he would certainly heed it.

Josephs soon took his departure—this conversation had taken place in Paddlewick's apartment—and the obsequious Tims now entered, ostensibly to ask for orders, but upon finding that the Englishman was alone, his manner changed.

"Hello! I thought that theatrical duffer was here," he said.

"No, he has just gone. Lock the door so we will not be disturbed, and get out the brandy so we can have a night-cap before going to bed," Paddlewick remarked.

The Englishman had the best apartments in the house, a parlor, with two bedrooms leading from it.

Tims turned the key in the lock.

"By the way, just throw the towel over the

knob of the door, so that if anybody should happen to take a fancy to look through the key-hole they will not be able to report that master and man are drinking together like a couple of tinkers," Paddlewick exclaimed.

"That ain't a bad idea, though I don't think that it is likely that any one would take the trouble to play the spy on us," the other replied.

"It is always better to be on the safe side," Paddlewick observed.

"Right you are, and no mistake!"

Tims then got out a bottle of brandy from his master's trunk, and the two proceeded to mix themselves glasses of stiff "grog" after the English fashion.

"I judge from the fact that you have not said anything that you did not find any crib in the hotel that you considered worth cracking," Paddlewick remarked.

"Oh, no, there isn't anything in a house of this kind," the other replied, with a disgusted air. "I don't believe that if every room in the house was cracked the swag would amount to more than fifty dollars."

"Wait until we get to Philadelphia. We will put up at one of the swell houses there and ought to be able to strike something."

"How does your little affair with the girl go on? You have been doing the handsome thing by her this week, I am sure."

"Yes, but I have not been able to do half as much as I wanted to do. Changing the play every night has kept the girl so busy that she has not had time to receive many attentions."

"That is so; rehearsing all the morning, getting out their dresses and studying their parts in the afternoon, and then acting at night keeps them pretty busy."

"Yes, next week in Philadelphia I shall have a better chance. The Philadelphia manager was here in the early part of the week, and was so much pleased with the performance that he has made arrangements to play the party for a month, instead of two weeks, as originally agreed upon, therefore we will only give two operas a week, and the girl will have some leisure time, so there will be an opportunity for her to receive my little attentions."

"Yes, then you will have the chance to make the running."

"And you can depend upon it that I shall not neglect any opportunities. Josephs, by the way, is a sharp fellow. He has noticed my attentions to the girl, and he was kind enough to give me a pointer—as he called it."

"Oh, you can depend upon these sheenies to keep their eyes open!" Tims declared.

"His idea was that if I wanted to catch the girl, my chances would be improved if I paid particular attention to Miss Herbert; the two are great friends, you know, and he argued that if I got Miss Herbert to speak a good word for me, it would have great influence with the girl."

"Well, governor, I think he is right enough there," the other remarked, in a reflective way. "But the question is, Can you get this Miss Herbert to help you? Now, I have been watching her pretty closely all this week, and my idea is that she is as sharp as a steel-trap, and the man who succeeds in pulling the wool over her eyes will have to get up mighty early in the morning!"

"Yes, I think you are right there; and I have a suspicion, too, that she is not over fond of me—there is a slight coldness in her manner, a peculiar way of acting which suggests to me that she is a little doubtful—that she has said to herself, you know:

"I am not sure whether you are all right or not, Mr. Paddlewick, and so I am going to keep my eyes upon you until I find out."

"That is it, governor!" Tims exclaimed, emphatically. "That is just the way I look at the matter. That woman has got eyes just like a gimlet; they seem to bore right into a fellow!"

"Well, smart as she undoubtedly is, I flatter myself that I have lived too long in this world to be baffled by a woman," Paddlewick remarked, with an air of firm determination.

"Of course! that goes without saying!" the other declared.

"Miss Herbert, I understand, has been on the stage ever since she was a child; she has traveled extensively, has seen a deal of life, and, as a natural consequence, she is suspicious of all strangers," Paddlewick remarked. "Now, she has not made up her mind about me, and so is wary and suspicious. My task is to remove her suspicions and make her believe that I am exactly what I represent myself to be."

"That is the ticket!"

"Well, I have managed to deceive acute, cunning, and remarkably well-informed men in my time, and it seems to me that it ought not to be such a difficult task to get this stage-girl to believe that I am all right."

"I don't know, governor," Tims observed, with a doubtful shake of the head. "Sometimes just a common, ordinary kind of a woman is more trouble to get around than a dozen long-headed men."

"Well, I shall try my best to win Miss Herbert's good opinion; but if I cannot succeed in doing it, and find that, without a favorable word from her, I do not stand any chance of winning

the other girl, then I shall be tempted to adopt some measures which may in the long run prove to be extremely unpleasant to this dashing *prima donna*, smart as she is."

"That is the talk, governor," the other declared. "If we cannot win the trick in one way, then we must try another. Never say die, anyhow!"

From this conversation it will be seen that a cloud was gathering over the pathway of the young actress of which she had no suspicion.

These two were desperate men, who hesitated not.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE DIAMONDS.

AND now the scene changes to Philadelphia.

For two weeks had the All Star Troupe played, and the engagement had been a profitable one.

Soapy Sam was in the seventh heaven of delight, and he firmly believed that he was going to establish himself as one of the leading managers of the country.

During the two weeks, Paddlewick had exerted himself to his utmost to make a favorable impression upon the two girls.

He occupied a private box each night, and although he was careful to sit away back at the rear of the box, so that it was impossible for any of the audience to see him—and, in fact, unless the performers on the stage came very near to the box, none of them could see him, either—yet it soon became known that it was the "angel" who occupied the box nightly, and that the magnificent flowers which were cast from the recesses of the private box to the two friends, Ernestine and Irma, came from the financial man of the troupe.

Miss Herbert, as the "bright, particular star" of the troupe, had no reason to complain on the flower question, for she received a dozen bouquets nightly; the majority of these bouquets were genuine tokens of admiration from love-lorn youths, who had been captivated by the beauty and genius of the comic opera queen, but I regret to have to state that the wily Mr. Josephs paid for quite a number of the floral offerings, which were so ostentatiously lugged up to the footlights by the ushers, or thrown on the stage by friends of the manager—"dead-heads," who entered on free tickets, and whom the manager felt that he could trust not to betray his secret.

The wily manager believed that men greatly resemble geese—where one goose goes, so go all the rest. Give the public to understand that a theater is crowded, and everybody rushes to get in; so, if the audience perceives flowers being bestowed upon an actress, a number of them are prompted to get bouquets to fling to their especial favorites.

Now Josephs wisely did not discriminate between his principal ladies. There were three prominent ones besides Miss Herbert, and Soapy Sam took care that all should have bouquets. It was his idea to get up a rivalry among the "dudes" in the audience; the more excitement he could create, the better the business would be.

But Paddlewick only threw his flowers to the two friends.

This created jealousy, of course, and if Irma had been alone in the company, she would have had trouble, but Ernestine was too old a stager not to be able to fight her own battles, and she fought for Irma as well.

Then, one night, to each of the bouquets that came from the private box a little white package was attached.

Ernestine's sharp eyes noticed the little box the moment the bouquet struck the boards at her feet, and there was a slight disdainful curl to her lips as she stooped to pick up the flowers, but when she faced the audience, with the bouquet in her hand, the scornful curl of the rich red lips was gone, and she smiled and bowed as the audience applauded, as they usually do when a rich floral tribute is bestowed upon a popular favorite, as though it was the proudest moment of her life.

And then when Irma's bouquet fell at her feet a few moments later, and Ernestine saw that there was a white box attached to it also, a slight frown clouded her face for a moment, but she was a true actress, who had been schooled for years to command the muscles of her face, and the frown passed away so quickly that none noticed it.

Irma perceived the box, but had no suspicion of what it contained.

Five minutes after the bouquets were thrown the end of the act came, and the girls hurried to their dressing-rooms to change their costumes for the next act.

As it happened, they had ample time, so had a chance to converse.

The two dressed in a room by themselves.

"Oh, there is a little box attached to your bouquet, too, Ernestine!" Irma exclaimed, as Miss Herbert placed her flowers by the side of the other ones on the dressing-room shelf.

Like all theatrical dressing-rooms, shelves abounded, and there was no furniture in the room but a couple of chairs, a wash-stand and two looking-glasses.

"Yes, but never mind the boxes until we get our harness on," responded the practical Ernestine. "Business first and pleasure afterward. When we are ready for the next act we will have plenty of time to examine our prizes."

Then the two proceeded to change their costumes.

In about eight minutes they were ready, thanks to their being able to help each other, and then, too, Ernestine was a wonderfully quick dresser.

"Now, then, for the plunder!" Ernestine exclaimed. "Open your box! We will find a ring apiece or I am greatly mistaken!"

The young actress had guessed correctly. Each box contained a ring, and in each ring a diamond sparkled.

"They are very pretty, ain't they?" Irma remarked, holding the bauble up so that the stone sparkled in the light. "Any one would think that they were real diamonds."

Ernestine cast a quick glance at the face of the speaker, and she saw that she had no suspicion of the truth.

"Yes, they do shine like real diamonds. What do you suppose rings like these cost?" she asked, carelessly.

"Oh, I don't know. These Rhine-stones are very cheap now. I saw some at one of the dry-goods houses on the notion counter the other day for a dollar apiece."

"Well, Irma, you are a dear, innocent thing!" the young actress exclaimed, much to the amazement of her companion. "These are real diamonds, and you could not buy either of these rings one penny short of a hundred dollars."

Irma uttered a little cry of alarm and dropped the ring upon the shelf as though it had suddenly become red-hot.

"Oh, haven't you made some mistake?" she exclaimed.

"Not a bit of a mistake!"

"But surely no one would think of throwing hundred-dollar rings upon the stage!"

"You are quite right, it isn't often that anybody makes a break of that kind, but you know, of course, who these rings come from?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so," Irma said, slowly, and her face flushed a little. "Mr. Paddlewick is in the back of the box, I believe."

"Yes, our angel, and to prove his right to the title he goes to the luxury of pelting his actresses with hundred-dollar diamond rings, but as far as I am concerned he has made a mistake, so I shall soon tell him!" And there was an angry look in Ernestine's great blue eyes, and a scornful quiver of her proud lips.

"With you the case is different, perhaps," she added after a moment's pause.

"How so?" Irma exclaimed in amazement.

"Well, the gentleman has been paying you considerable attention, you know, and, possibly, he thinks that this is a delicate way of showing you how much he thinks of a young lady about your size."

"Ah, yes, but he has made a sad mistake, and you know, Ernestine, that I have never encouraged him in the least!" Irma declared, very much distressed.

"Well, that is a fact, I believe. I will do you the credit of saying that you have never manifested any desire to accept his attentions. I wronged you a little by the way I spoke, but I didn't really mean it, dear," and the young actress passed her arm, caressingly, around the waist of the other. "But I was annoyed, you see, by this ring business, and I spoke carelessly."

"Oh, I know that! I know that you are a true friend to me—the best I ever had! If you were my own sister you could not be nearer, or dearer to me!"

And then the two girls embraced and kissed each other, while the tears came into their eyes.

"There, there! we mustn't make geese of ourselves!" Ernestine exclaimed. "And if we cry we will ruin our make-up! As it is, both of us will need a little powder!"

And then, with the deftness born of long practice, Ernestine with a puff-ball repaired the damage that the tears had done.

"There, now we are all right again; altogether lovely and the chief of ten thousand!" she announced in the burlesque way peculiar to her. "But now about these rings—what do you propose to do?"

"Oh, I don't know; I am utterly at a loss what to do."

"Will you trust to me to arrange the matter?"

"If you will only take the trouble!"

"I don't intend to keep my ring, you know; I do not believe in that sort of thing!"

"Neither do I, and I am sure that if I retained it, I should not have a moment's peace."

"Give it to me, I will settle the matter after the show to-night."

"Hello, there's the whistle for the change of scene; it will be my music in a moment!"

Then snatching up the rings, she put them on one of her fingers, already liberally adorned with similar trinkets, turning the stones inward so that they could not be seen, and away she went for the stage, arriving at the "wing" just in time to go on.

Irma followed slowly, as she did not have to appear until the next scene.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE ACTRESS TALKS PLAINLY.

THE curtain fell on the finale of the opera, and the two girls proceeded to the dressing-room, where they removed their stage costume and assumed their street dresses.

"Now, don't make any mistake about this matter, you know," Ernestine cautioned. "If you have any idea that you will ever learn to like this Mr. Paddlewick, why, you ought not to hesitate to accept his ring. But if you are satisfied that he is not the man for you, and never will be, then you should not keep the diamond."

"Oh, I am quite sure about the matter!" Irma declared, firmly. "There is something about the man that I do not like. I cannot exactly explain what it is, for he seems to be a pleasant gentleman, and I am sure he has done all in his power to be agreeable, and to see that I was comfortable, ever since we started. But I am quite positive that I shall never learn to like him!"

"Perhaps there is another Richmond in the field," Ernestine remarked, shrewdly.

"Well, I don't know," the other answered, evidently confused.

"I have noticed that you are very much interested in certain letters that you receive regularly once a week."

Irma's face became scarlet.

"Oh, those are from Mr. Foxcroft, the lawyer, who was so kind to me," she murmured.

"Yes, you are right; he has been a good friend to you, and if there is not a little feeling of affection in your heart for him, there ought to be!"

"He is much older than I—a wealthy man, too, and I do not suppose that he ever thought of me in any such way; I was cast upon the world, all alone, and he pitied me."

"Pity is akin to love, you know!" Ernestine exclaimed, in her prompt, matter-of-fact way. "And as to his being much older, according to what you have told me, I should judge that he was not over forty-five."

"No, I do not think that he is as old as that."

"Ah, my dear, he is not too old for you, hen; there is a deal of truth in the saying, 'Better an old man's darling than a young man's slave.' And to my thinking, a man of forty-five, who has taken proper care of himself, is right in his prime. Then, in regard to his riches—that will not be any obstacle. If the man loves you, his wealth will not stand in the way."

"Oh, but I do not really think that he cares anything for me, and I know I am foolish to think of him!" Irma exclaimed.

"Nonsense! If he did not care something for you, he would not write every week as regular as clockwork. Silly boys might do such things, but a man of this sort would not."

"Well, I hope that you are a true prophet!" and then Irma pillow'd her burning face on Ernestine's breast. "You will keep my secret?"

"Oh, you bet!" and then the comic opera queen burst into a hearty laugh. "I am the great American slang-bird, and no mistake!"

A few minutes more and the girls were ready for the street.

"Josephs happened to come in behind the scenes during the last act, and I told him that I wanted to see Mr. Paddlewick in the parlor at the hotel when we got home to-night after the show, and I flatter myself that I will astonish that gentleman's weak nerves!" Ernestine announced, as they quitted the dressing-room.

"He must not think that because he is the angel and finds the money for the troupe that he can throw diamonds to a girl of my size with impunity. I do not suppose he will like it, for I shall be obliged to talk to him after the fashion which is popularly known as the Dutch uncle style; but if a man wants to avoid a thing of this kind he must be careful how he behaves."

"There will be a row, of course, for some of these men who back shows have queer ideas sometimes. He may become angry, and decide to sever his connection with the All Star Troupe, but it does not make any difference now. We have struck the tidal-wave of success, and could get along just as well without this Mr. Paddlewick and his money as with him."

"Josephs is a few hundred ahead, so he could go on alone now; besides, we have the reputation of having made a success, and when a show once gets that, it doesn't need to have much money behind it."

Long experience in the business had made the girl about as good a judge of this sort of thing as could be found in the theatrical world.

When the girls reached the hotel they found Mr. Josephs waiting in the corridor.

Soapy Sam was evidently nervous; he did not understand why Miss Herbert should want to see Paddlewick, and he feared that there was trouble ahead.

"Mr. Paddlewick has just gone up to the par-

lor," he said, beaming on the young actress with his most fascinating smile. "But, I say, Miss Herbert, what on earth do you want to see him for? Will I not do as well? If it is anything about the business he will have to refer the matter to me, for he knows nothing at all about it."

"No, I must talk to him," Ernestine answered, in her firm, decided way. "You can come up, though; there isn't anything private about the matter."

The manager accompanied the girls gladly enough, for there was a weight on his mind.

He knew that Ernestine was the great attraction of the troupe, and he was in fear and trembling that something had occurred to make her dissatisfied.

The three found Mr. Paddlewick in the parlor, and he was alone, for the hour was late and the guests of the house were about all in bed.

He arose as the ladies approached and greeted them with a polite bow.

"Let me congratulate you on your performance to-night, Miss Herbert," he said. "I don't think that I ever saw you act better; you really seemed like one inspired."

"Thank you. I appreciate the compliment, I assure you," Ernestine replied, with a graceful courtesy, her face wearing a cheerful smile; but in her heart she said, "Now, then, we are shaking hands just as the prize-fighters do before they begin their contest."

"And you, too, Miss Allison, did finely to-night," Paddlewick said, to Irma, with another bow. "You're improving steadily. I don't think I ever heard you in better voice."

"I try, of course, to do the best I can," Irma replied, in her modest way.

Then Miss Herbert helped herself to a chair, and the rest followed her example.

"Mr. Paddlewick, I am a very plain-spoken young woman," Ernestine began, in her frank, open way. "I am not one of the kind to beat about the bush, for when I have anything to say I always come right out with it as soon as possible."

"A very admirable plan, it seems to me," Paddlewick remarked, with a smiling face, although in his heart he was cursing the impudence of the bold girl, for he saw that there was trouble ahead.

"Well, it was the way I was born, so I cannot take any credit to myself," the comic opera queen remarked, candidly.

"Now, I have come to speak to you about these two rings, which were thrown on the stage to-night, one to Miss Allison here, and the other to myself," and as she spoke, she drew the rings from her finger and held them up.

Josephs looked on in amazement. This was something new to him, for Paddlewick had not asked his advice in the matter, and this was just where the wily schemer made a mistake, for if he had consulted Soapy Sam, that wily gentleman, knowing the peculiarities of the young actress, would have told him that he could not hope to win the favor of so notional and independent a young lady as Ernestine Herbert by any such means.

She was not the kind of girl to be bribed by a diamond ring.

"I believe that I am not in error in supposing that these rings come from you—you understand that in this matter Miss Allison here has requested me to act for her," the comic opera queen added before Paddlewick could reply.

"Yes, Miss Herbert speaks for me as well as for herself," Irma remarked.

"Certainly, of course, the rings came from me," the gentleman observed. "It is a slight tribute which I am proud to pay to youth, beauty and genius," and Paddlewick bowed very low as he finished.

"Well, we are both of us awfully obliged, of course," the young actress remarked, speaking with extreme politeness, yet there was a touch of sarcasm in her voice. "We have youth—no doubt about that—we fancy we are good-looking, as most women do—and we hope we have genius, but we do not want any diamond rings!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A SHREWD MOVE.

"No, thank you, no diamond rings in ours, if you please," the young actress continued, in the most decided manner. "We appreciate the compliment and all that, but we really do not want to keep the sparklers, so if you will have the kindness to take them back, both Miss Allison and myself will be much obliged to you," and she extended the rings to Paddlewick.

The Englishman was very much annoyed at the turn affairs had taken, and he was unwise enough to attempt to argue the matter with the lady.

"Now, really, you know, I do not want to take these rings!" he exclaimed. "I bought them on purpose for you two ladies, and as you are always together, like a pair of twin sisters, I got the rings exactly alike, thinking that you would be pleased by this little token of my esteem."

"Mr. Paddlewick, we are not much more than strangers to each other," the actress said. "But if you had been an old acquaintance of mine you never would have made this mistake. Mr. Josephs here would not have done it; you would not catch him throwing me any diamond rings."

"Mine gootness, no!" the wily Hebrew exclaimed, agitated at the very thought of such extravagance. "When I do anyting of dot kind you can put me in the lunatic asylum!"

"Of course, our customs in England are different from those in vogue in this country," Paddlewick explained. "But there it is considered to be quite the proper thing to bestow little gifts of this kind upon gifted artists."

"Well, in this country there are a few men—I hope that you will not take it as a personal allusion if I term them flats, who make fools of themselves in that way," Ernestine observed. "I, myself, have had several pieces of jewelry thrown to me upon the stage or sent to my hotel. When the donor's name and address were given—some men are fools enough to write themselves down as donkeys in that way, after the fashion of ancient Dogberry—the articles were immediately returned, but if the giver chose to remain unknown, the things were kept for a reasonable time, so as to give a chance for the party to come forward, and then, if nothing was heard in regard to them, off they went to the nearest jewelry store and there were speedily turned into cold cash; but as for wearing the things I would as soon think of sporting a snake for an ornament!"

The girl spoke hotly, and her flashing eyes and flushed cheeks showed that her temper was roused.

Paddlewick was so annoyed that his gifts should be treated in this way that he could not help showing it.

"Upon my word! I do not think that there is any reason for your treating my gift so cavalierly!" he exclaimed. "You surely do not look upon me in the light of a stranger? Here I have enjoyed the pleasure of your acquaintance for some weeks now, and I had no idea that you would feel offended if I bestowed a trifling little trinket upon you, just to show my appreciation."

"I do not call a hundred-dollar diamond ring a trifling little trinket!" Ernestine exclaimed, tartly. "But I do not see that there is any use of our discussing this matter any further. I have told you what my opinion is—how I feel about the affair, and Miss Allison regards it in the same light. I suppose that there are girls on the stage, and in private life, too, who think that it is all right to take presents of this kind, the actresses defending their conduct on the plea that it is right to 'spoil the Egyptian,' but I do not agree with them, and since you seem reluctant to do as I wish about this matter, you will force me to act in an unpleasant manner."

"I will place your rings here on the table," and she did so as she spoke. "Now, you can take them or leave them; it is all one to me, for I wash my hands of the matter. And furthermore, Mr. Paddlewick, I wish you to understand, sir, that this will end our acquaintance. In the future we will be as strangers to each other. Because you happen to be interested with Mr. Josephs in this troupe is no reason why I am compelled to know you."

Now, for the first time, the scheming Englishman saw what a mistake he had made, and he hastened to recover his lost ground.

"Oh, my heavens!" he cried. "My dear Miss Herbert, what a mistake you have made! You have so totally misunderstood me in this matter! Allow me to explain—allow me to show you how the case appears to me. I went into this enterprise with my friend, Josephs, here, more for a lark than anything else—just to amuse myself—to pass away the time, as you might say. Of course he expected to make money. I thought myself, when he explained how he could arrange matters, that the trip would be profitable, but I had no idea that we would literally coin money, as we have done, ever since we started."

At this point, Josephs, who had been winking in the most vigorous manner at the Englishman, could restrain himself no longer.

"Hang it all, you know!" he cried. "You must not go and gifes der business away in this manner!"

"Oh, that is all right!" Paddlewick replied, with a dignified wave of the hand. "Miss Herbert here is too old a professional to be deceived. She understands that we are making large profits."

"Yes, that is true, and I am glad of it," the actress remarked. "It is much nicer to play to large business than to empty benches."

"And so, under the circumstances, I thought it was only right that I should show you how I appreciated your talents, for it is my belief that it is to you we owe our extraordinary success."

Josephs was in despair.

"Ach, Himmel!" he muttered, under his breath, "if he keeps on like this, she will vant a big raise in der salary!"

"I resolved to give you the ring, because I really thought that you ought to have some-

thing more than your salary; its companion I threw to Miss Allison, because she was your friend and I fancied that you would be pleased to have her receive a token; then, too, I will admit that I have a sincere friendship for the young lady, and I wanted to let her see it. In reality, though, when it comes down to the money question, you can count both of the rings as your share of the profits."

"I am highly honored, I am sure, by your extremely complimentary remarks," the comic opera queen replied, with a bow. "If your motive was as you state, your conduct is excusable; but there is a much better way of showing that you appreciate my talents than by throwing diamond rings to me. To the artist an advance in salary is always acceptable," and there was a decided trace of sarcasm in her voice.

"Just what I was going to suggest," Paddlewick exclaimed, seeing the chance to make a point and eager to do it. "Hereafter your salary will be just double what it is at present!"

Soapy Sam was on his feet as though forced from his seat by an electric shock.

"Mine gootness! v'at are you saying?" he fairly howled. "We cannot stand dot—it ish rank nonsense!"

"Oh, yes, we can, and you, Miss Allison, will be treated the same. Your salary shall be doubled too!" Paddlewick exclaimed with the air of a millionaire.

Josephs was so exasperated by this liberality that he lost his voice, but the way in which he glared at his partner spoke volumes.

"That is all right, Mr. Josephs. I will arrange that matter with you," the Englishman continued.

"Ah, well, we had better take der salary and let Miss Herbert have der show!" he grumbled.

"I trust, ladies, that this will be satisfactory to you?" Paddlewick remarked.

"Oh, yes, if you are satisfied I am," the young actress replied.

"And you, Miss Allison?" the Englishman inquired.

"Oh, I am satisfied, of course, but I fear that you are treating me really better than I deserve."

"Not at all; the laborer is worthy of his hire!" Paddlewick quoted. "I will see that the new contracts are made out to-morrow, and now suppose we all have a glass of wine in honor of this new arrangement!"

"No, thank you, I never drink wine, nor anything of the kind, for that matter," and Ernestine rose. "I am glad the matter is arranged, and will bid you good-night!"

"Good-night!" said Irma with a bow, and then the two girls withdrew.

Not a word was said until the pair were in their room, and then Ernestine exclaimed:

"Irma, this man is a scoundrel! There is not the least doubt of it in my mind! He has some deep purpose in view. Oh, if that New York detective was only here, but I will write to him and ask his advice this very night before I sleep!"

And the comic opera queen was as good as her word.

After the girls retired, Soapy Sam freed his mind.

"Oh, v'at a botch you haf made of this affair, mine friend!" he exclaimed. "Why did you not speak to me? I would hate tole you shust v'at kind of a girl this Herbert vas! You could not buy her mit a diamond ring any more than you could buy der moon!"

"Well, it is all right now," Paddlewick replied. "The advance of salary will come out of my share. I will stand that, so you will not have to pay anything."

"Yesh, dot ish all right, but it ish bad policy," the other replied.

"I made a blunder, and I had to do something."

"Dot vas true, but if you had spoken to me der thing would not have happened."

"It is done now, and cannot be undone, so we must make the best of it."

Josephs agreed to this and the two separated.

Paddlewick proceeded to his room and there he was soon joined by Tims, and when the fellow entered the room the Englishman noticed that there was an anxious look upon his face.

CHAPTER XL.

THE PLOTTERS UNMASKED.

"WHAT is the matter? anything wrong?" Paddlewick asked.

"Well, yes; I am afraid that there is another party in this 'ere troupe who is on the same lay as ourselves," Tims replied.

"Is that so?"

"It is a fact."

"Sit down and explain," Paddlewick said, helping himself to a chair.

The other complied.

"Well, you know, governor, I have been on the watch ever since we came to this 'ere house, 'cos it was my notion that we would be able to do a stroke of business afore we went away, and, of course, I have had to prowl around considerably, and about half a dozen times I have

met this swarthy customer who calls himself a Cuban—this Gomez, the cove w'ot looks arter the baggage."

"Yes, I know him, and I must say that I don't like the looks of the fellow," Paddlewick observed. "I have noticed that the man seems to avoid observation, but I never took much notice of the fellow, for I thought that he acted in that way because he was a foreigner and did not understand our ways."

"Well, it is my opinion, governor, that the man is a foreign crook, and he is with this party just so as to have a chance to pick up some swag. He wouldn't be sneaking around the way he does if he was not on some lay of the kind."

"Let me see," observed Paddlewick, in a meditative way. "Perhaps it will be possible for us to turn this man's presence to good account. If we get an opportunity to work a good trick, we might be able to arrange it so that suspicion would fall on him."

"That would be a jolly good thing to do!" Tims observed, with a chuckle.

"I think it might be arranged."

"But, I say, governor, my idea is that the man is scheming to get a chance to help himself to your valuables."

"You think so?"

"I do. He has been sneaking around in the neighborhood of your room for the past two days. I did not say anything to you, for I thought I would be able to catch him; but the fellow has been too smart for me."

"I think it would have been better if you had spoken to me about it, for then we might have arranged some trap for him," Paddlewick observed.

"Well, you know, governor, I wanted to be sure of my ground," the other explained. "But it isn't too late; there'll be plenty of chances to catch him. Now, to-night, arter you had all gone to the show, it was about eight o'clock I think, I happened to come up-stairs to your room arter my pipe, and as I reached the landing I heard a door close and the sound of the key turned in the lock; then, when I came round the turn, I met this Gomez face to face, and I will swear that he had something which looked amazingly like a skeleton-key in his hand; but he managed to pocket it before I could get a good look."

"I didn't pretend to notice it, you know, and was careful not to act as if I suspected that anything was out of the way, for I didn't want to put him on his guard; but, governor, I am satisfied that that cove had just come out of your room."

Paddlewick looked annoyed.

"I don't see what the fellow could have been after," he remarked.

"Perhaps he thought that you were in the habit of keeping your cash in your trunk," and the speaker glanced at the handsome sole-leather trunk which stood in a corner of the room.

"The fellow would be sadly disappointed if he tried any game of that kind," Paddlewick remarked. "But now you speak of it, it recalls to my mind a circumstance which puzzled me in Paterson when we first started out."

"It was on our opening night there. After supper I went to my trunk and got out a clean collar, and when I put the box back in the tray, I noticed that I had happened to put it exactly in the center. If I had measured, I could not have hit it more exactly."

"I locked the trunk and went to the theater, when I returned, after the show, I opened the trunk, for some purpose—I forgot exactly what now—and immediately noticed that the collar-box had been moved from where I left it, only a couple of inches, but enough for me to notice it."

"By gum! I should have thought that would have made you open your eyes!" Tims exclaimed.

"It did, for I immediately suspected that somebody had been at my trunk, but after examining it in the most careful manner, I could not discover that anything was missing, and so I came to the conclusion that I must have made a mistake about the box."

"It is my impression that you did not, governor!" Tims declared. "It was this foreign cove. He wanted to get in his work right away, but you beat him on account of there being no stuff in the trunk that he could get away with."

"Yes, I believe that you are right. I think the fellow did expect to make a raise, and if he tried the same game again to-night he has been disappointed, for I don't leave my cash in any such insecure place."

At this moment the door opened abruptly, and the man of whom they had been talking, Gomez, the Cuban, entered the room, and behind him came two stalwart-looking men, dressed plainly in dark business-suits, but they had that peculiar look which, to the experienced eye, denotes the officer of the law.

The two within the room sprung to their feet.

"Don't attempt to make any resistance or it will be the worse for you!" the Cuban said in a determined tone, and speaking without the slightest trace of an accent.

"What does this mean?" Paddlewick cried in

an indignant tone, his cheek paling a little though.

"It means that you are in the hands of the police. Snap on the bracelets!" the other commanded.

"This is outrageous! and you shall answer to the law for this!" the Englishman cried, indignantly.

But despite his protests both he and Tims were handcuffed.

"Now I will trouble you for your keys so I can get at the trunk," Gomez said.

"You'll find nothing there, sir, of a criminal nature!" Paddlewick exclaimed.

"Don't you be too sure of that!" was the response.

The trunk was opened, and the things in the top tray unceremoniously tossed out upon the floor.

There did not appear to be anything unusual about this article, it being composed of light wood, the same as all trunk trays, but the Englishman's breath came thick and hard from between his fast set teeth as he beheld the proceeding, and if the human eye could kill he most surely would have slain the searcher.

The bottom of the tray was composed of two extra thin pieces of wood instead of one, and by removing four small tacks, the top piece of wood could be lifted up from the other, and when this was done some legal-looking documents were exposed to view.

Cold drops of perspiration stood on the forehead of the Englishman.

He knew that he was lost.

The care with which the man removed the false bottom showed him that his suspicion was correct, that the trunk had been tampered with before.

"Now, then, I think I have you!" said the searcher as he arose to his feet, the papers in his hand.

"Who are you?" hissed the Englishman between his clinched teeth.

"Oh, I have not introduced myself, have I? Well, my name is Ephraim Solager, and I am often called The Countryman Detective."

"You may be a smart fellow, but I don't think you have got me in so tight a place as you think," the Englishman cried, with a sneer.

"That remains to be seen. If this little affair had happened thirty years ago, I could not have done much, but thanks to the Atlantic Cable I have got your pedigree down fine. You are Alonzo Marmaduke, alias The Governor, alias The Strangler, and I arrest you on the charge of having murdered your aunt, Miss Elizabeth Allison Marmaduke, at Oldharbor, New York, and from her you stole these papers, which prove the right of your cousin, Irma Allison Marmaduke, to inherit the property of her grandfather, Martin Marmaduke, of Marmaduke Hall, Surrey, England."

Of course the detected villain swore that it was all a lie, and if the acute detective had not gained access to his trunk, discovered by the papers Irma's real name, and wired to England for information, the truth might never have come out.

The Strangler was tried and convicted, but as the evidence was purely circumstantial, his neck was saved, he being sentenced to State Prison for life.

This little episode did not break up the tour of the company, although Irma was obliged to leave the troupe and stay in New York until the trial was over, as she was an important witness; then she rejoined the company.

When the season, which was a very successful one, ended, Irma persuaded Ernestine to go to the town where the lawyer resided for the summer.

In the mean time Foxcroft had been to England and succeeded in getting Irma's claim to her grandfather's estate recognized.

He came back full of triumph, and down in the pleasant country town wooed and won the orphan girl just as the comic opera queen had predicted he would.

Our story is told.

Only a few more words remain to be said.

Ernestine is now one of the most popular of all the comic opera stars. Soapy Sam is again in hard luck, but as Miss Herbert has consented to make a tour with him next fall he hopes for great gains.

Still, in his way, the terror of all evil-doers, goes the hero of our tale, and at some future time we may relate more of the adventures of the Countryman Detective.

THE END.

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